

Master's Thesis
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Aalto University
School of Arts, Design and Architecture
International Design Business Management



Brand Strategies
& Aesthetics

DESIGNING VISUAL FRAMES FOR A PRODUCT



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Abstract

The objective of this study is to explore brand aesthetics, the visual choices made when products are placed in certain contexts and to understand how these decisions impact the perception of the brand. Therefore, this thesis studies visual structuring, image production and meaning transfer process. This research pursues expanded knowledge of visual capabilities of an image in the context of branding by exploring the capacity of images to operate as strategic platforms for brands to show up and more precisely for products to stand out in a meaningful manner.

This study uses semiotic interpretation to better understand how brands and products can be encoded into visual forms – into advertisements. Culture forms an important aspect of the analysis.

The method of this study regards the semiotic advertising analysis of three sneaker adverts. The selection process was derived from cultural conventions relevant to the sneaker scene in 2016. Selection was undertaken based on product innovation and newness of the sneaker category regarding the competitive landscape of 2016 when work on this thesis began.

The focus of the analysis is to provide a greater understanding of connotative levels of advertising and how implicit and layered meanings are constructed within cultures. This study represents an attempt to expand the knowledge of visual structuring and visual articulation via advertising. The cultural environment provides a lens through which the three adverts are analyzed.

The principles of semiotics can be viewed as an effective tool for brand owners to avoid gaps between brand intention and consumer interpretation by increasing the awareness of visual factors. Semiology clarifies the implicit meaning transfer structures – regarding what images mean and how they mean. In

addition, semiotics may provide better argumentation and communication competence in a business-driven environment that necessitates support via images and visual scenarios represented by the creatives.

Based on the analysis, McCracken's (1987) notion that advertisements are fundamentally based on meaning transfer by bringing the brand and the representation of a culturally constituted world together, is confirmed. A brand's significance requires cultural relevance and appropriation to be part of some cultural setting. The analysis and the sneaker culture overview reveal that more abstract attachments are exchanged via the product. The aesthetic power and aestheticization of the original style in communication seem more vital than the material properties of a product itself or at least regarding arousing interest and potential engagement. This confirms that advertisements shift from more concrete notions towards abstraction and cultural expression.

Keywords meaning transfer process, semiotics, cultural constitutions, image production, visual structuring, sneaker fashion

Tiivistelmä

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli tutkia brändin mielikuvien luomiseen vaikuttavien visuaalisten valintojen merkitystä kuvallisessa ympäristössä ja ymmärtää paremmin, miten nämä tekijät vaikuttavat lopullisen mielikuvan syntyyn brändi estetiikan näkökulmasta. Loppu työ keskittyy tutkimaan kuvan rakenteita, visuaalisia kuvan kompositioita sekä mielikuvien ja merkityksien siirtoa tässä prosessissa.

Tavoitteena oli ymmärtää syvällisemmin brändin mielikuvien ja merkitysten syntyä ja niiden moninaisuutta kuvallisista mainoksista käsin tarkasteltuna. Tutkimuksessa analysoidaan tapoja ja ominaisuuksia semioottisista merkeistä käsin, jotka kytkeytyvät osaksi brändin mielikuvaa ja miten tämä tulkinta on kulttuurisesti rakentuva. Tämän syvennetyn tiedon voidaan olettaa toimivan strategisena erottautumisen välineenä yrityksille, brändeille ja tuotteille.

Tutkimus hyödyntää semioottista tulkintamenetelmää saavuttaakseen syvemmän ymmärryksen siitä, miten brändit ja tuotteet voidaan muuntaa mielikuviksi ja merkityksiksi mainoksen avulla, jossa kulttuuri muodostaa tärkeän lähtökohdan merkityksien siirrolle, tulkintojen ollessa lähes aina kulttuurisidonnaista.

Semioottisen analyysin tavoitteena on laajentaa ymmärrystä mainonnan konnotatiivisesta tasosta, epäsuorista merkityksistä ja merkityksen monikerroksellisuudesta. Tutkimus on yritys laajentaa tietämystä kuvan visuaalisista rakenteista, kuvan tuottamisesta ja tarkoituksenmukaisesta brändi artikulaatiosta.

Tutkimuksessa analysoidaan kolme lenkkari (sneaker) mainosta. Analyysiin päätyvien mainosten valinta perustuu tuoteinnovaatioon sekä tuotteen uutuusarvoon suhteessa kilpailukenttään vuonna 2016, jolloin tutkimus sai alkunsa. Näiden syvällisten ja laadullisten tulkintojen avulla pyritään laajentamaan

tietämystä kuvan rakentamisesta ja mielikuvien tuottamiseen liittyvästä dynamiikasta.

Semioottisten peruseräpäätteiden ymmärryksen voidaan katsoa tuottavan lisäarvoa yrityksille ja tarjota työvälineitä osumatarkempaan brändimielikuvien tuottamiseen. Tietoisuuden visuaalisten asioiden merkityksistä ja rakenteista, voidaan katsoa estävän tavoitteellisen mielikuvan ja toteutuneen mielikuvan välistä eroa syntymästä. Semiotiikka avaa merkityksen siirtoon liittyviä rakenteita – mitä kuvat tarkoittavat ja miten ne tarkoittavat. Toisaalta semiotiikka tarjoaa luoville tekijöille laadukkaampaa argumentaatiota ja kommunikointi keinoja kohtaamisiin, joissa abstrakteille visioille ja skenaariolle tarvitaan konkreettista tukea ja perusteita toteutuakseen.

Analyysien perusteella, voidaan todeta, että McCracken:n (1987) huomio siitä, että mainos rakentuu merkityksen siirtoon, jossa brändi ja kulttuurisen maailman representaatiota tuodaan yhteen, vahvistuu. Siten brändin merkitykselliseksi kokeminen edellyttää, että brändi näyttäytyy kulttuurisesti relevanttina ja on osallisena jotakin kulttuurista asetelmaa. Analyysi osoitti, että merkitysten vaihto tapahtuu abstraktilla tasolla, fyysisten tuoteominaisuuksien sijasta. Esteettisten tyyli valintojen sekä vilpittömän ja omaperäiseen tyylin luomisen katsotaan olevan merkittävä menestystekijä, fyysisten tuoteominaisuuksien esille tuonnin sijaan. Tämä puolestaan vahvistaa olettamusta, että mainonta ja mainokset ovat siirtyneet kohti ilmaisullisempaa ja abstraktia tuotantoa ja tulkintaa.

Avainsanat merkityksen siirto, semiotiikka, kulttuurisidonnaisuus, kuvan tuottaminen, merkitysjärjestelmä, sneaker muoti

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Foreword

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Last, but not least, thank you to my advisor who I could count on and who managed to release me from writing blocks and academic fears.

01. Introduction – personal approach to the study

This thesis is an attempt to challenge brand owners and managers to place the visual matters at the strategic core and highlight the importance to acquire knowledge concerning image management – the planning, composing and choosing the right visual image.

When this thesis got started in 2016, I discovered unleashed potential regarding brand communication via aesthetics and the engagement creation within. In my previous work as a sports apparel designer and concept designer, I experienced both an increasing need and use of visual storytelling via imagery. This

change has been rapid and vast as digitalization has democratized content creation in which photography has become ordinary and ubiquitous practice. Social media and particularly image-sharing communication channels have stressed the essence of an image and current communication methods have become photo-centric. Visual communication via visual images is a self-evident necessity for brands to employ and therefore brands have become content publishers, engagers and doers, instead of tellers. This thesis aims to grasp the power and persuasive potential of aesthetics and showcase methods to turn it into a manageable activity that has a

strategic and goal-orientated character. This thesis also pursues to highlight self-awareness regarding the brand and increase consciousness of how to construct the brand from the right components to achieve the intended expression.

Another branch of this study is personal. My personal interest is to discover how to manage visual communication in a smart and consistent manner that enhances the designs and succeeds in being current and relevant without losing the brand's authenticity. Thus, one of the foremost tasks is to gain personal in-depth knowledge of branding aesthetics and image structuring and learn how to convert this knowledge into the quality of image and ambitions regarding art directing.

01.1 Motives of the study - photo centricity and social media influence on marketing communication

According to Sportswear International (2019, p. 32) one billion people across the world use Instagram, with 500 million scrolling through the social media app daily. In November 2014, 100 hours of video were uploaded to YouTube every minute and 60 million photographs to Instagram every day, figures which were dwarfed by 350 million images uploaded to Facebook and 400 million photos sent through Snapchat (Rose 2016, p. 290). The flood of images and info travel is constant and rapid, even overwhelming as people consume with their eyes and vision is central to understanding the information in society (Schroeder 2002, p. 4). Text-based communication has shifted towards more visual approaches and communication

tends to be more about showing instead of telling. Visual images offer instant and powerful communication and despite both text and images are visual, a single image may convey a thousand words and stimulatingly vivid images may move consumers to action (MacInnis & Price, 1987). Thus, visual issues should be viewed as mainstream in strategic thinking. The question then becomes, how to manage the image, to deliver relevant and appealing imagery that is creative, recognizable and performs positively for the brand? This requires carefully designed visual (and commercial) stimuli directly related to brand strategy with visual communication at the core.

The rapid growth of social media and peer-to-peer communication has presented new extensions to self-expression and offered a channel to express personal identities through self-customized media content (Chernev, Hamilton & Gal, 2011). Branding has shifted from the back-end to the front as consumers occupy the driver's seat. In postmodern terms, the consumer is the consumed and consumption has become the means through which individuals define their self-images for themselves and to others (Firat, Dhlokia, & Venkatesh, 1994). Brands and products can be viewed as facilitating consumer expression and desired personal lifestyles. In fashion, social extension of consumption has been acknowledged. According to sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel (1986) fashion is a form of life that gives ability to combine uniform spheres of activity towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation. In short, fashion regards social relationships and self-expression and is simultaneously about standing out and fitting in. What has been established in fashion system is



Figure 1. NikeLab x JFS Collection, Spring 2015



Figure 2. Nike Tech Pack, Summer 2015

also acknowledged in postmodern branding as both can be viewed as mediums for constructing and interpreting social common world. Consumers not only use brands as instruments for expressing their identity, but also for projecting an individualized image of a desired lifestyle (Chernev et al. 2011). New approaches to brand communication are required as consumers demonstrate the need to be touched in a way that connects them more holistically to the brand and is responsive to their lifestyles in meaningful ways. The current market (and world) has become more complex, diverse and global as attention shifts from corporate media to self-media, from controlled to people driven communication and from authority to freedom (Gobé, 2009). Brands need to adapt language that is appealing to consumers and that enables them to stand out from the noise. Whether intentionally or not, brands state something alongside their delivered images. This “something” should be viewed as a manageable effort with a strategic and goal-orientated character.

Meaningful content delivered by brands is related to emotional responses enabling brands to function beyond product qualities. Brands – not just products – can be viewed as cultural resources that people relate to and simultaneously as meaningful components of their identities and life (Holt, 2004) and even non-verbal mediums of thinking (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996). The relationship between image and product is recognized and the promotion or advertisement concerns neither products nor selling but is instead about drafting the image and filling it with the product (Firat et al 1994). As a large corporation, Nike provides an example of merging artlike approach and poetic style with athlete sneakers and sportswear by establishing

profound relationships with the product and image to deliver creative expression. This is particularly showcased in Nike’s collaborations (Figures 1 & 2).

Contemporary consumer consumes experiences based on emotional response along with their identities. Images may provide a bridge for consumers to experience this connection that is merged with their lifestyles. From brands’ perspective this preferably means grasping the aesthetic power of visual images and acknowledging the visual efforts as means for recognition management and ways to articulate brand strategies.

01.2 Research objectives

The term “visual frame” should be translated into a mental concept created around the physical product that contributes to our perception. The term “visual frame” is an attempt to embody the research objectives into two words. Thus, the main objective of this thesis is to explore the context where the product is placed and what different context does for the perception of the product. The focus of this thesis is to explore brand aesthetics and how brand and product can be encoded into advertisements and more precisely, the visual choices made when product is placed in certain contexts and to understand how these decisions impact perception. Therefore, this thesis studies visual structuring, image production, and the meaning transfer process. The research aims to have extended knowledge of the visual capabilities of an image regarding branding. This thesis studies the capacity of images to operate as strategic platforms for brands and products to stand out

and create engagement. Semiotic interpretation is utilized to better understand how brand and product can be encoded into advertisements.

This thesis aims to showcase what businesses could benefit from visual sensitivity and how this acquired knowledge of visual images could be beneficial when articulating brand strategies. Brand owners could utilize such acquired knowledge in brand and consumer accurate image production which likely help brands win mental battles and make meaningful marks on consumers' mind or at least capture their attention. Thesis focuses on studying the meaning transfer process and how image functions as a mean in this process. In order to sustain a critical approach to gaining understanding of how visual images work Rose (2016) argues that visual images should be taken seriously as they have their own effects which are always related to social contexts and to the visualities the spectator brings to the viewing process. In this study, the image alone is placed at the core and great focus lies on gaining knowledge concerning image production, its aesthetic power and the expertise of visual structuring.

Culture forms the first cornerstone of this study. The image itself should not be solely observed, but also how the image is viewed by the spectator (Sturken & Cartwright 2009). Berger (1972, p.9) expresses this as "ways of seeing" and argues we are always observing the relation between things and ourselves. Sturken & et al. (2009) call this manner the "practice of looking" and instead of information, advertisements should be considered as semiotic resources that become meaningful according to the cultural lens used by the viewer (Holt & Mulvey, 1997). Consumers' interpretation of advertisements depends on the contexts and

individual, social and cultural structures. Culture impacts advertising meaning transformation and advertising functions by bringing the product and a representation of the culturally constituted world together in the advertisement (Mick & Buhl, 1992).

Semiotic is a second cornerstone of this study. This thesis utilizes the terminology established in practice of semiotics to pursue additional knowledge of meaning transfer processes and how advertisements acquire their meanings. However, instead of conducting a methodological analysis of images and finding patterns from multiple advertisement analysis, this thesis utilizes the typology presented in semiotics to explain and expose the implicit meaning transfer process. Thus, vocabulary is used to make common sense of meaning production processes and to clarify how associations and meanings are composed.

This thesis will contribute a type of knowledge – visual expertise – that may provide in-depth understanding of the image production and the complex layers of meaning by making them more visible and manageable. This visual expertise can be viewed as serving accurate sense of visual matters appropriate for both brand owners and image producers to succeed. A wider understanding of meaning production and the principles of semiotics may provide an effective strategic tool for brand owners to avoid a gap between brand intention and consumer interpretation.

The study will be conducted as a case study of selected sneaker companies – New Balance, Puma and Adidas and through their sneaker campaigns. The knowledge is aimed to be achieved by defining the key concepts in the

meaning making process by comparing the similarities and differences of selected sneaker campaign adverts. The arguments for selecting mentioned companies and their particular adverts are opened up later on a Sub-chapter 6.2.

The research questions are as follows:

Q1 What are the key connotations delivered through selected adverts?

Q2 What are the style choices made in image production? Can these particular styles and aesthetic choices be loosely defined?

Q3 What differentiates products from each other in selected adverts? What are the elements of difference?

01.3 Structure & outline

This thesis begins with a framework overview that aims to outline the structure and focus. Chapters 3. and 4. form the literature view. Chapter 3. addresses visual issues of the meaning transfer process in relation to brand, consumption, advertising and photographs as well as introduces perception management by presenting theories related to branding and consumer culture theory (CCT). This chapter also describes how adverts and photographs contribute to meaning production by shaping and reshaping consumers perception. The notion of style is also introduced as a method for brands to articulate strategies. Culturally constructed meanings are also acknowledged and discussed, cultural discourse becoming focal element of this thesis. Chapter 4 discusses semiotics to explore

the meaning transfer process by providing a point of view for brand owners and image producers to gain understanding of visual management.

Chapter 5. presents project called "Visual Frames" which is an attempt to tackle art directing and observe image structuring regarding encoding. This project consists of two photographer collaborations which resulted a photo collection that are generated from the foundational questions of this thesis, what the context for the product and how same things mean different things in different contexts? This project should be viewed as visual space to reflect the readings and learnings derived from the literature view.

Chapter 6. discusses data and methodology. First, the data selection process is introduced. Second, the methodology to conduct the semiotic analysis is discussed. The semiotic concept and vocabulary are used to better understand how brands and products can be encoded into advertisements and how advertisements can be decoded into signs and meanings. Semiotics is used later in the analysis of three sneaker advertisements.

Chapter 7. presents sneaker culture review and the case study companies – Adidas, New Balance and Puma. The cultural landscape forms a focal standpoint for the advert analysis presented later in Chapter 8. Thus, the sneaker culture provides the lens through which interpretations are generated and filtered. The findings of the analysis are largely derived from cultural aspects presented in this chapter.

Chapter 8. provides a review of the analysis of the three sneaker adverts, focusing on decoding

the adverts and using the semiotics as a guiding principle for interpretations. Along with semiotics, knowledge of the cultural landscape is fundamental for the analysis. This chapter also presents the structure for the sneaker advert interpretations. The structure of the analysis comprises four layers – personal, denotative, connotative and stylistic, all of which form framework how the adverts are decoded and their meanings are defined.

Chapter 9. introduces the relevant findings and the discussion related to them. The outcomes of advert analysis are based on the principles presented in semiotics and relevant in cultural constitutions. All results are discussed through the research questions: What are the key connotations delivered through selected adverts? What are the style choices made in image production? Can these particular styles and aesthetic choices be loosely defined? What differentiates products from each other in selected adverts? What are the elements of difference?

The final Chapters 10. is reserved for conclusions. Chapter 10. summarizes, reflects and evaluates the research and reverts to main research questions. Recommendations for future work are also introduced.

02. Theoretical framework of the thesis

This thesis aims to draw a comprehensive landscape of image production and consumption where the brand and consumer represent the two counterparties of the meaning transfer process (Figure 3). The primary goal is to expand in-depth knowledge of the complex layers of images by increasing awareness of the power of aesthetics in communication between brands and consumers. The increased awareness – visual expertise – can consequently be assumed to make brands more manageable and resonating for consumers. However, the authors of the image no longer have full control as the consumer has become an active participant of creating the

brand image alongside the brand owners. Thus, the primary goal is to be able to motivate the consumer to complete the process and ensure the meaning transfer will be activated and precisely employed. Ads cannot mean anything on their own.

The following framework describes the dynamics of the meaning transfer process in brand entities and the involved principals. The aesthetic interface where meanings are produced and consumed can be turned to somewhat manageable effort – aesthetic power – which has strategic and goal-orientated character.

Making the communication process meaningful requires the shared consciousness of culture, symbolism, signs, lifestyle, values and identity that both brands and consumers desire connection with among the shared language used to communicate these spheres. The framework of this thesis is presented below in Figure 3, and the following chapters grasp the building blocks outlining this framework.

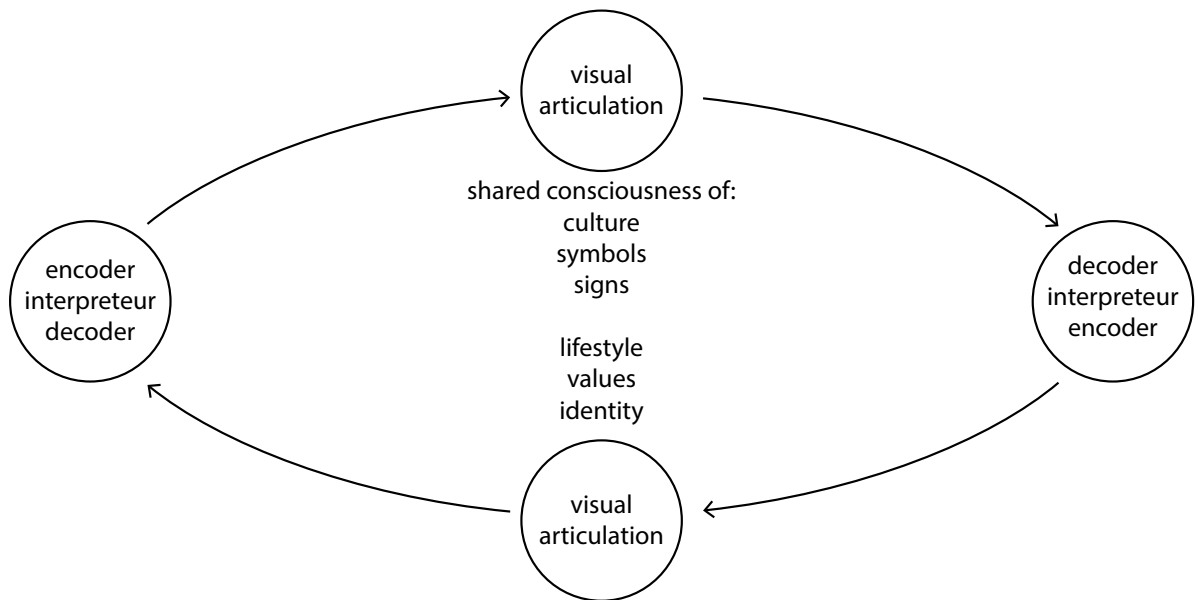


Figure 3. Framework of thesis, modified from Watson & Hill (1980, 147)

03. Visual images as instruments for meaning transfer

This chapter presents the ground principles of communication and how meaning transfer process appears in the context of branding. The chapter clarifies how companies can convert their capacity to guide interpretation and meaning with visual images in the culturally constituted communication system. Advertising and photographs are discussed and presented as powerful instruments to arouse interest and communicate brand strategies, cultures and narratives.

According to Schramm (1954), communication is described as a cyclical two-way process.

Watson & Hill (1980, p. 147) demonstrates this cycle as shown in Figure 4, which presents the communication model as a dynamic and interactive process where communication effectiveness is only achieved when the message is understood, particularly when the message encourages the receiver to think in novel ways. The communication model functions as a ground principle for image production and management. Attention-grabbing adverts function similarly to other visual arts in that they exist for those who have the means of appropriating them, otherwise they mean little to the spectators (Rose, 2016, p. 45).

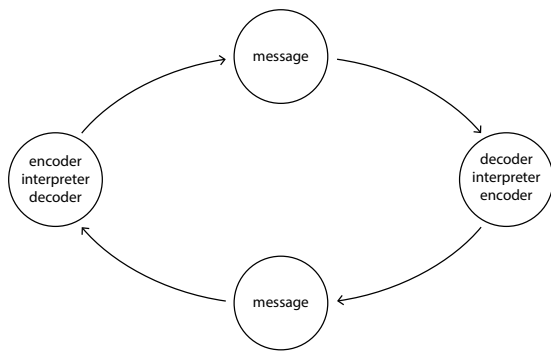


Figure 4. Communication model by Watson & Hill (1980, 147)

Brand-related visual images and adverts are constructed and designed to be attention-grabbing and engaging, which represents their desired purpose. Attention becomes established once there exists certain degree of resonance with consumers' personal and social identities (Berger & Chip, 2007). Different audiences bring different cultural competencies to the interpretation, as the same codes (i.e., signs) are not necessarily employed in their "reading" (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2004). How an individual interprets visual images depends on the uses the person has for the interpreted meaning as this interpretation is unique and may be different from that which is intended one (Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006).

The visual stimulus brands wish to deliver ought to be viewed through consumers' perspectives. According to McCracken (1987), the ways in which consumers experience visual stimulus and construct meanings is culturally and personal interest driven. In advertisement, the experience is connected to ad's sign structure, denotative content and what the viewer brings to the experience from their personal history (Mick & Buhl, 1992). Thus, consumers are the final arbitrators of the experience.

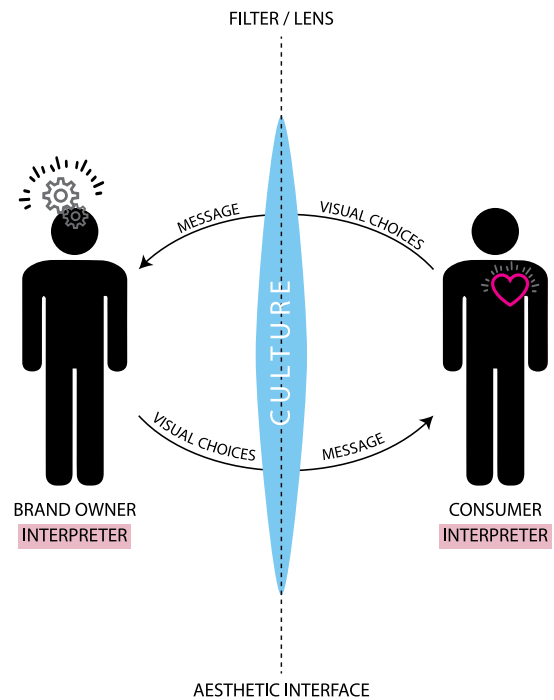


Figure 5. Visual communication and brand articulation model

03.1 Brand & the visual articulation

Visual articulation via images offers strategic branding possibilities along with style choices made which help to articulate marketing strategies and segmentation. Moreover, visual images such as photographs offer links to express particular brand cultures and narratives or storytelling that brands wish to elevate and connect with. From brands perspective achieving attention and significance requires reaching the audience on their terms. Authenticity has been argued to be a key component of consumer interaction with brands (Holt, 2004). Consumers avoid brands if they are viewed as inauthentic and if they fail to function as an authenticating narrative for consumers' identity projects (Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel 2006).

Thus, authenticity can be translated into quality of being original, genuine and unique. According to Benjamin (2018), authenticity is a quality which cannot be reproduced in visual image when original is copied. The photographic styles and careful image structuring may provide a powerful method to articulate essential brand qualities and direct the consumers attention towards desired directions.

David Fischer (2017), the founder and CEO of Highsnobiety, argues that in order to appear authentic brand must be connected to culture that matters to target segments, choose brand influencers with authentic connections to particular cultures, be present in platforms that are relevant for the audience and place target audience at the forefront whether through stories that connect with them or how they connect with the stories. All actions should be audience driven. Fischer (2017) also argues that content cannot merely be visually appealing, but must be engaging and engagement is linked to communication that is valuable to the audience. When end-users' lifestyle profiles are understood, marketing communication can be more effective (Chiagouris, 1991). For brand managers, recognizing different lifestyle profiles and being a part of them with the brand, offers a gateway for brands to be accepted and cherished. According to Fischer (2017), 80% of consumers claim authenticity to be the most influential factor of becoming follower of a brand. The ability to articulate authenticity, means translating the authenticity in a manner that is appropriate for the lifestyle of the audience. Hence, this understanding requires skillsets to combine the audience-driven knowledge into consistent brand communication. However, brands need to be aware of not sacrificing the

core brand while reaching the audience and building engagement. One example of a brand that has managed to cultivate new interest using artful approaches by connecting brand, culture and influencer cohesively together is Adidas with Kanye West (Figure 6).

There is established interaction between branding, consumption, knowledge of consumer identities and lifestyle profiles which should influence the brand strategies and guide visual communication. Aesthetic appearances become more important including styles, expressions, tones, designs and everything that helps to develop a script and props for the authentic enactment of the role individuals tend to play (Kornberger, 2010, p. 140). Brands have the ability to be facilitators of this identity creation process where brand can function as an aesthetic interface for products to showcase consumers' identity and lifestyle (Schroeder 2002; Kronberger, 2010). Thus, brands have the capacity to guide interpretation, appropriation and constitution of the meaning.

03.2 Consumption & symbolism

This chapter clarifies the meaning transfer process. As stated, gaining understanding of identity creation systems and lifestyle orientations may lead to more successful and accurate marketing strategies and engaging communication. Thus, consumers manifest their identities and lifestyle goals through the consumption, rework and transform symbolic meanings. Brand managers and marketers instead utilize this knowledge by appealing to consumer identity whether existing or desired through visual elements and imagery



Figure 6. Yeezy Season 1, Autumn / Winter 2015

(Schroeder, 2002). Careful and consistent image design enables delivering desired visual clues to arouse particular associations.

Consumption can be viewed as self-presentations and consumers on the contrary identity seekers and makers – even culture producers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumer culture theory (CCT) provides a framework that addresses the sociocultural, experimental, symbolic and ideological dimensions of consumption (Arnould et al., 2005) and it intends to tie the complex systems of consumption and meaning together by describing the process of meaning transfer (Figure 7). In CCT, consumption and meanings are derived from cultural aspects where culture functions as a framework of interpretations and actions of consumers (McCracken 1986). Consumer culture theory represents culture as fundamental to experience, meaning and action (Geertz, 1983) and as bundling product symbolism, ritual practices, brand meanings and the symbolic boundaries that structure personal and collective identities. According to McCracken (1986), cultural meanings are located in three dimensions: the culturally constituted world, the consumer good and the individual consumer. In this system, goods provide an opportunity to create immaterial culture material whereby goods can be viewed as both creations and creators of the culturally constituted world.

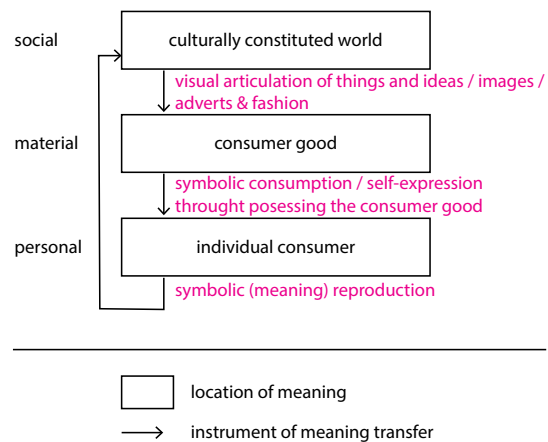


Figure 7. Meaning transfer process. Modified from McCracken's model "Movement of meaning" (1986, 72)

The meaning transfer requires instruments enabling the meaning to flow from the culturally constituted world to goods in order for the good to achieve desired associations and properties that are meaningful to consumers. Images can be viewed as a driving force of the market at current era when the market rotates around them while brands can operate as platforms to which these images and associations are attached. Advertising functions as a potential instrument in this meaning transfer process to bridge together the consumer good and representation of culturally constituted world. (McCracken, 1986.)

Consumer culture within lifestyle connotes individuality, self-expression and stylistic self-consciousness as well as empathizes symbol production and consumption where image and specific lifestyles are celebrated (Featherstone, 2007). Consumers consume visions of a positive life that in current market are accelerated with images that influence, construct and reflect their identities (Schroeder, 2002). Consumers of today make choices based on whether or not the product fits their lifestyle or whether it represents

a new interesting concept. Products are imported to images that correspond to these consumer-celebrated lifestyles whether actual or desired by the consumer. Brands are thereby enablers of lifestyle by allowing consumers to perform their identities due to their ability exist as symbolic resources. Ads on the other hand regard well-researched images or instruments for meaning transport of consumer desires including who they want to be. (Kronberger, 2010; Schroeder 2002.)

The cultural approach in marketing relies on the idea that companies' success depends on understanding, managing and appropriating cultural signs and symbols which can be converted into visual forms and a coherent brand appearance resonating with consumers (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). As stated, advertising represent one instrument to deliver these symbolic properties of product and cultural meanings that matter to consumers (Arnould et al., 2005). Thus, the design of advertising concerns which cultural meanings are to be linked to products through advertising. According to Holt (2004), brands' success regards the ability to communicate in a manner that grasps cultural contradictions and helps people to resolve and organize tensions in their lives.

03.3 Advertising, meaning & expression

This chapter focuses on adverts and their photographic representations as well as how they contribute to meaning production within branding. The power of advertising relies on the interconnection between advertising and photography as adverts share the ability to frame and reframe and turn meanings correspond to

corporate interests (Goldman & Papson, 1996, p. 216).

Adverts bridge consumer goods to the representation of culturally constituted world (McCracken, 1986). Advertising concerns about drafting an image and filling it the product (Firat et al, 1994). Adverts mission is to create differences since there exist little difference between products (Williamson 1978/1985). The context given to products determines their meaning and interpretation, therefore current adverts share the ability to function on diverse levels and can be viewed as an expressive platform for the brand. According to Schroeder (2002), many battles between brands are resolved in "visual domain" which is the worksite for ads.

Rose (2016) notes that it is currently complex to define what is or is not an advert, as their types are fragmented with diverse nature. Brand and current advertising are tightly partnered where contemporary adverts work to give a brand certain values and/or emotional associations rather than selling anything specific (Johnson 2008, p. 207). Advertisement functions as platforms for engagement and contain an opportunity to create a meaningful communication and interaction. Contemporary advertising does not solely rely on the transfer of meanings between signs but also on evoking a mood or a feeling attached to brands that is difficult to analyze using semiological terminology (Rose, 2016, p. 122). Contemporary advertising is increasingly not merely about the meaning transfer of signs but also about the abstraction of the feeling and the expressive content of adverts.

As adverts are currently more complicated to define, it has called after few re-definitions. First, there appear a tendency to extend the concept of an advert – what it does, to whom and how. Due digitalization and internet, the change has been rabid and pervasive. Many adverts – specifically the ones created to digital platforms – are intentionally designed to serve narrow and specific audience (Fischer, 2017; Rose, 2016). Thus, modern take on advertising has led to advertising which is precise and targeted that no longer aims to reach wide and diverse audiences. Second, as Kornberger (2010) argues aesthetic appearance has become more important – including styles, expression, tones and everything that enables to embody the much-appreciated authenticity and relevance for brand to show up. The aesthetic power is increasingly focal rather than material properties of a product (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). The aesthetic power can be linked to what Rose (2016) calls expressive and the “feel” dimension of an advert. As aesthetics goes beyond semiotic sign systems it might be relevant to discuss style.

The concept of style is not novel as the term and its linkage to expression is acknowledged both in visual art and fashion.

Georg Simmel (1986), the respected pioneer of fashion theories pointed out the essence of style as a way to be identified with certain groups or movement by enabling relations to culture. According him, style allows one to be simultaneously excluded and included as it enables one to fit in or stand out, individuality and collectivity. (Simmel, 1986)

According to Schmitt and Simonson (1986, p.85) in terms of identity management via aesthetics

one of the foremost tasks for brands (and companies) is to be connected to certain styles. Advert’s meaning is aimed to be transported from the chosen elements that preserve certain styles onto brand and/or the product which the ad directly or indirectly presents (Williamson, 1978). The aestheticization of style provides a method for brands to be noticed and to be identified, as advertisements function as a template for targeted styles and contain potential for engagement.

One example of a consistent and iconic advert style is Calvin Klein. An important creator of the Calvin Klein style has been fashion photographer Steven Meisel along with model Kate Moss. The aestheticization of style is embedded in black-and-white photos where models are unposed with a blank expression on their faces. These images can be viewed as minimalist and modern where the models’ look is provocative, rebellious, rough and natural. Kate Moss presents a new look of a model, who became “it girl” of that time. This offering became a visual asset for Calvin Klein creating an identifiable approach to fashion advertising and a fundament for Calvin Klein’s brand appearance.

Due the current environment is recklessly evolving, there might not be equal possibilities to become anchored to certain styles compared the 1990’s when the CK advertising style was created. There appears request for constant injection for brands to appear relevant and in sync with current time (Vidal Tenomaa, 2017; Fischer 2017). If brands do not adapt, they cease being relevant and become outdated. There exists a danger to get stuck what made the brand famous of. (Vidal Tenomaa, 2017.) The Calvin Klein case can represent both a strength and burden for the brand to have such



Figure 8. Detail from Ck One advert, 1994.

a strong visual appearance as it may prevent the brand from seeking the next new thing. However, the photographic style in adverts provides a concept to use brand elements in new contexts and appear relevant as well as to create a new perspective of something known.

According to Kronberger (2010, p. 260), the art world is derived from system that ensures expectations of audience are met – even when expectations include surprise and the unexpected. Businesses and branding may utilize learnings from the arts, as artistic creativity can challenge consumers in positive way. If consumers are only presented with what they want or readily accept, may kill part of the potential of social change and intellectual diversity (Hirschman, 1983, p. 49).

03.4 Photographs & representation

Photographs have the ability to shape experiences since they express, reflect and interpret (Sturken et al., 2009) as well as constitute a system of representations through a visual language-like system that is both engaging and deceptive (Schroeder, 2002, p.115). Through representation we understand, describe and define the world as we view it. The meaning of things is constructed through representation and in the contemporary world the meaning of things is bonded to cultural context. (Sturken et al., 2009.) Images and photographs play with representation by revealing initial assumptions and attracting us to experience multi-layered meanings beyond what is obvious, apparent or true (Sturken et al., 2009, p. 16). They are supposed to achieve more than displaying the world as it is as they contingently

create new interests by making new visual decisions (Sontag 1977, p. 89).

Photographs contain an ability to function as a means of understanding. According well-known French photographer Henri Cartier – Bresson, this understanding and taking photographs are linked to visual expression and therefore photograph itself functions as a display of a way of life (1999, p. 16). Photographs guide how people see, what they see, what they remember, what people consider worth seeing, how they imagine things look, how they think about their identities and those of others or what they think of our forefathers (Schroeder, 2002, p. 67). In brand communication, photography allows powerful and persuasive forms of communication and as Rose (2016) points out, photographs consequently rarely appear innocent or unintentional.

Photographs show how particular things could be viewed or could be made to look (Coleman, 1998, p. 57). In terms of branding, photographs provide a platform for perception management and it may be crucial to acknowledge their aesthetic power when designing or re-designing brand appearance. English Burberry represents one brand that has undergone several rebranding. Burberry has had a problematic history with its prestigious nova check pattern known as the brand's trademark. In the late 1990's Burberry struggled as the brand was hijacked by football hooligans and working class who were viewed as representing a lower class by the loyal Burberry users. The brand become rejected and abandoned by the original users having no longer control over who wore it and in what context. Simultaneously the market was oversaturated with both fake and original checkered items,

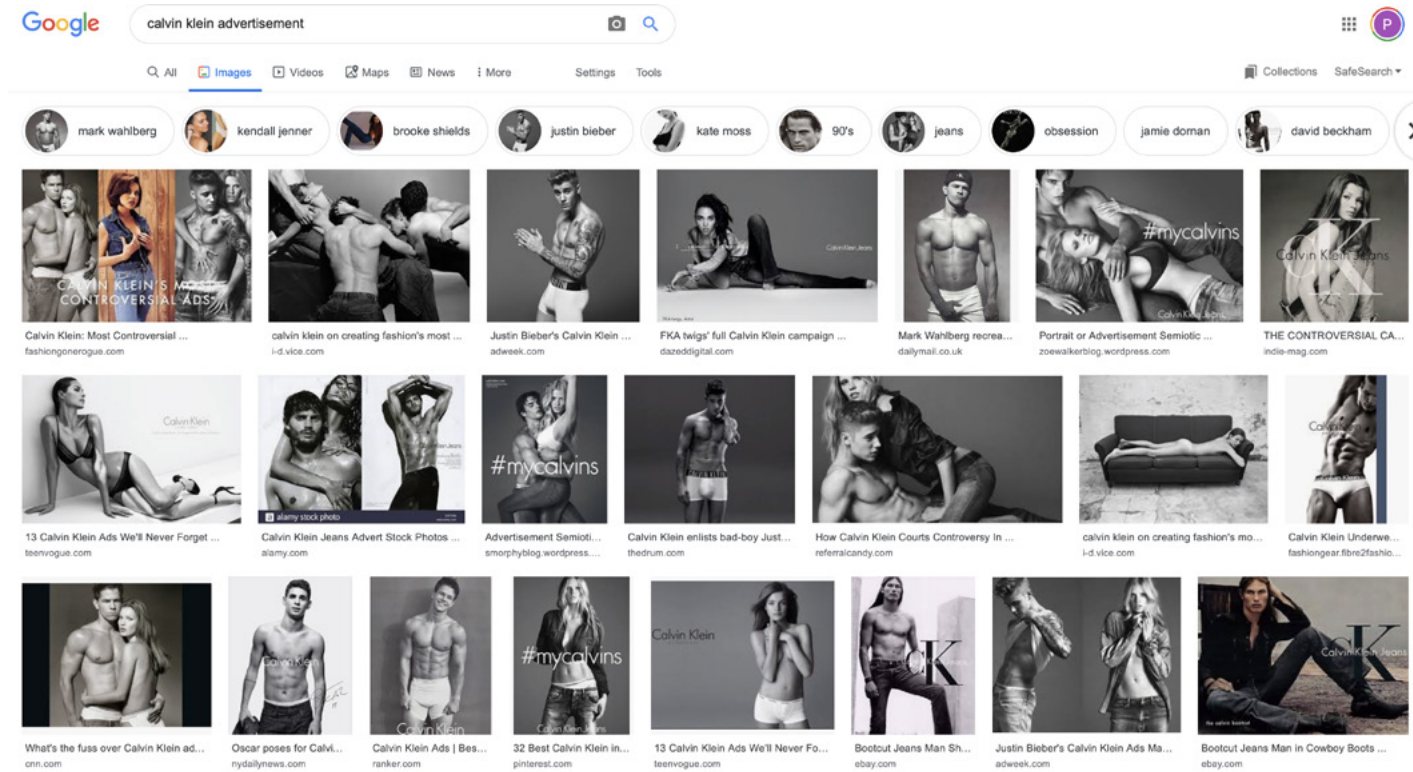


Figure 9. Google search results for “Calvin Klein Advertisement”, that captures the Calvin Klein advert style and brand DNA.

making Burberrys nova check trademark mundane and mainstream.

Photograph provides an opportunity to reset the undesired connotations by offering one stream to turn the image towards desired ones. Mario Testino shot the advertising campaign for Burberry Spring 2000 where Kate Moss played a Burberry bride (Figure 10). The campaign consists of a series of black-and-white photos that captured glimpses of moments of the wedding day in a private family album style. This campaign managed to refresh the conservative Burberry with the help of Testino's aesthetic style and Kate Moss' presence adding youth and sex appeal to the brand.

According McCauley (1997, p. 63) all photographs are representations and as much as they tell about the photographer, about the technology used in producing the photo and their intended use, they also tell about events or things they interpret or reflect. Technological development has notably impacted photography as easy to use small digital and cell phone cameras have influenced how photographs are taken both by amateurs and professionals (Lenman, 2005). Social media and especially Instagram have changed the way we look at photography and how the world appears. The creation of a photograph always involves some degree of subjective choices such as selection, framing and/or personalization that remain invisible to the viewer (Sturken et al., 2009). However, both Instagram and cell phone cameras have made this feature of photography more visible as amateurs are interested in cultivating their artistic eye and self-expression through photographs. This current turn and photo centrality have accelerated the world's photographability and has become the

condition under which the world is constituted and perceived (Schroeder, 2002, p. 14).

In terms of branding, photo centrality, photo posting and visually appealing storytelling has influenced how brands present themselves and how they are validated by consumers placing the visual assets at the core. According to Zabrina Hossain the product manager of Shopify, "Instagram provides to anyone, to anywhere in the world an instantaneous bond with the brand, snapshot of the visual and artistic DNA that can be absorbed within 30 seconds" (Sportswear International, 2019). Instagram has stressed visual articulation skills in branding and provided an aesthetic stream to showcase brands in quick, artful, inspiring and face-to-face ways for consumers and the platform has influenced both how photographs are taken, and how photographs are looked at.



Figure 10. Burberry, Spring 2000

04. Visual images as semiotic signs

In this chapter, the semiotic approach is presented, and the vocabulary is linked to photographs of the adverts and to the meaning transfer process. This chapter pursues showcasing the semiotic concept as a mechanism for brand owners to increase the awareness of visual matters. Such visual expertise provides brand owners the possibility to apply insights from semiotics to branding practices and to accurate visual articulation. According to van Leeuwen & Jewitt (2001), semiotics regards a science that addresses two fundamental questions. First, it attempts to resolve what images present and how and second, it has ability to reveal the

implicit meanings of images as well as the ideas and values associated with.

Semiology explores how images create meanings in relation to broader systems of meanings beyond the obvious (Rose, 2016; p. 106-107). According to Iversen (1986, p. 84), semiology is a concept that “lays bare the prejudice beneath the smooth surface of the beautiful”. When analyzing visual images, it is appropriate to consider that the analysis is always tied to wider cultural theory and contexts that may appear to be dynamic and complex (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). Images are understood as ordered system of signs or

visual cues derived from cultural conventions. The constructed signs and the discourse of their generated meanings require analysis. (Moisander et al., 2006, p. 87.) The advert analysis of Adidas, Puma and New Balance presented in Chapter 8, explores the sign selection by decoding the adverts and utilizes the semiotics as a guiding principle for interpretations.

Semiotics concerns meaning and probes how representation generates meanings, rather than what the meaning is produced (Williamson, 1978). Thus, semiotics provides an analytical vocabulary and set of tools for taking the image apart and tracing how it works (Rose, 2016). Analyzing visual images is to understand their specific elements that stand for something else (Moisander et al., 2006, p. 87) and the purpose of these analyses is to establish the cultural meanings derived from the signs and discover the logic of patterning (Ball & Smith, 1992). Hence, semiotics is active study of implicit meanings that consists of signs and a sign centric practice. The sign is the basic building block of the concept and can be defined as an any entity that refers to something else (Chandler, 2007, p. 2). Semiotics is a system of signs that both exposes the deconstruction of meaning similar to decoding and describes the process of constructing the meaning similar to encoding (Schroeder, 2002; Goldman et al., 1996). Referring to Figure 3., framework of the thesis, presented in Chapter 2., semiotics is embedded into more complex systems of communication.

In terms of advertising, the construction of meaning is formed of systems of sign values which are related to the desirability of an image. In advertisement the meaning is formed based on the sign value and attention is generated

by recombining meanings or more precisely by creating additional value by combining novel and unexpected signs together. (Goldman et al. 1996, p.3-7.) The sign value of an image will be further discussed in Sub-chapter 6.2.

04.1 Sign & definitions

Semiotics is often referred to as a language-like system. Therefore, the sign can be considered as a key unit of (visual) language that consists of two parts: the signified and the signifier. The signified is the concept or an object, the meaning itself, while the signifier is the sound or an image attached to the signified that which produces the meaning. (Rose, 2016)

Sign is always “thing-plus-meaning” where signifiers are things and signifieds are ideas, that are materially inseparable (Williamson 1978, p. 17-18). Thus, when referring to language-like system, semiotics aims to structure meaning processing through signs that are both verbal and nonverbal (Mick 1996, p. 197). Distinction between the signifier and the signified is crucial to semiotics, and any meaning-making device can be interpreted as a sign. The exact number of signs in representation is therefore limitless.

First, the definition of sign by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913) is presented. Saussure was respected linguist of his time and the sign system was originally established by him. Saussure argued that since language consists system of signs, it should be extended to cover larger science of signs within society. Hence, he developed semiology that studies the role of signs as part of social life and to him sign system appeared as a dyadic relationship between a concept that

is the signified (mental concept) and a sound image that is the signifier (the spoken word, the physical existence of the sign). (Fiske, 1992; Mick 1986.) Saussurean elements of meaning are demonstrated in Figure 10. Saussure's primary insight was that the relationship between these two is within language as different languages use different words for the same signified (Mick, 1986, p. 197; Rose 2016, p. 113). For example, "child" in English is "barn" in Swedish. In turn, "barn" in English does not refer to child at all, instead it refers to a large farm building.

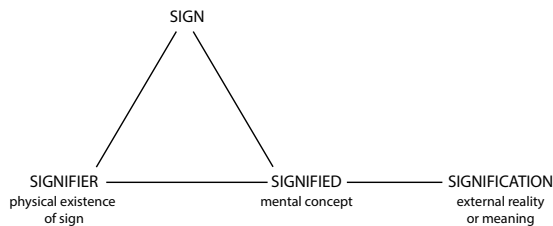


Figure 11. Saussure's Elements of meaning (Fiske, 1990, 44)

Second definition was contributed by Charles Sander Peirce (1839 - 1914), to whom semiotics appeared to be a complex process. Peirce's model regards a process of communication by any type of sign which could be anything that stands for something (sign's object) to somebody (sign's interpreter) in some perspective (sign's context). (Fiske, 1990, p.41-44.) Although both Peirce and Saussure explained the processes of signs in relation to what signs consist of, in Peirce's model semiotics work through three rather than two positions as shown in Figure 11 (Mick, 1986, p. 198). Peirce suggested the term "referent" to emphasize the signified as culturally shaped concept and therefore Peirce's argument can be viewed richer as Saussure was unconcerned with how meanings tend to change in use (Rose 2016, p.117-118). The word "sick" refers to illness

or describes a person who is not feeling well. However, the same word in slang connotes cool or that something is good, "Man, that is sick!".

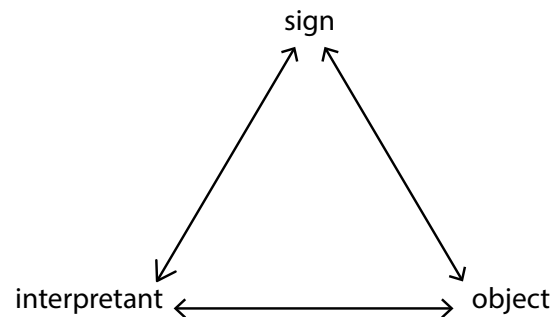


Figure 12. Peirce's triad of semiotics (Mick, 1968, 198)

Third definition was contributed by Roland Barthes (1915-1980), who was the first to implement semiotic knowledge into visual images such as advertising and photography and who suggested that the meanings projected to images are more complex and do not appear as universal or self-evident (Ribi re, 2002). According to Barthes, the immediate visual impact of signs is relatively easy to decode which he called denotative level. The more complex level he called connotative level of signs, which instead is culturally bond and appears as implicit. (van Leeuwen et al., 2001, p. 94-99.) It could be described as a higher level of meanings. Connoted meanings refer to something the image invites the viewer to interpret which may result meanings beyond those intended (Rose, 2016; Ribi re, 2002). Thus, semiotics studies not only signs themselves, but also something that appears to be indirect and stands for something else. Denotation and connotation are further discussed in Subchapter 4.4.

04.2 Icon, index & symbol

In semiotics, signs are recognized and categorized based on their relation to represented objects. According to Peirce, the material sign (signifier) is caused by what it means (the signified) (van Leeuwen et al., 2001, p. 79). According to Peirce, sign can be categorized into three types: icon, index and symbol and the difference of them, is derived from the types of relationship between the signifier and signified (Mick, 1986). However, these classifications are not exclusive since a sign may overlap and simultaneously connote iconic, symbolic and indexical traits (Fiske, 1992, p. 72). In terms of advertising and marketing communication which elements are placed onto images and how: via juxtaposing, alternatively or vis-a-vis along with the setting of the frame, are crucial to meaning transfer (Williamson, 1978). In terms of photography, the photographer borrows these signs and relies on their abilities which are learnt through lived life and life experiences (van Leeuwen et al., 2001, p. 79).

Iconic sign relates to its object as imitating, simulating or resembling it where the signifiers represent the signified as apparent (Sebeok, 2001, p. 10; Rose, 2016, p. 119). As a result, this includes photographs since they can be viewed as representations of something as it is (Sebeok, 2001, p. 9). However, the iconic character of a photo is complex and not self-evident as photographs rarely appear to be innocent (Rose, 2016). Iconic sign functions in a basic semiotic capacity by manufacturing concrete simulative representations of the world (Sebeok, 2001).

Indexical sign refers to something or someone else indicating where they are (Sebeok, 2001). According to Rose (2016, p. 120), the relationship

between signified and the signifier can be considered “inherent”. The relationship of a sign and its object can be characterized as pragmatic and causal (Seppä, 2012, p.136) such as smoke indicating fire or snow indicating winter. Photographs can be considered as an index as they can be viewed as a cause of something that was there when the photo was taken.

Symbolic sign is established by social conventions (Sebeok, 2001, p. 10) and is dependent on the codes of the viewer’s background, requiring participative presence of an interpreter to create a signifying connection (Mick, 1986). The relation between signifier and signified is conventionalized yet arbitrary (Rose, 2016, p. 120). Symbolic signs bear no obvious relationships to their objects and therefore are indirect and culturally and socially bond. Cross is a symbol of Christianity, a bitten apple of Mac device and white color may be a symbol of purity.

As stated, one sign can simultaneously contain several capacities of being iconic, indexical and symbolic. Individual, cultural and social structures are evident, and therefore according to Seppä (2016) no sign exists purely as iconic as interpretation is always culturally and socially driven. The identification of signs helps to define what each sign does and provides detailed vocabulary for decoding an advert or photograph (Rose, 2016).

04.3 Syntagma, paradigma & bricolage

As mentioned in Chapter 4, signs work in relation to other signs and therefore no single sign should be explored. Meaning-making process relates

how signs function in relation to other signs and how this impacts their meaning (Seppä, 2016). Saussure described the dynamic relationship and interaction of signs using a chessboard metaphor, where moving one chess piece alters the relationships of all other pieces on board (Mick, 1986). The selection of signs, regarding what is included and excluded and how they are placed on an image impacts their interpretation.

This chapter presents three concepts concerned with the dynamic entity of signs, their relations to each other and to culture. Syntagma and paradigm provide a structural context of how signs are organized (Mick, 1986) and their meaning arises from the differences between the signifiers. The third concept bricolage has an expressive character and originates from subcultures. These concepts are relevant assets in visual articulation for exposing both structural and cultural forms of the sign as well as ensemble of signs.

Syntagmatic signs gain their meaning from the other signs surrounded by them in a still image (Rose, 2016, p. 120). Syntagmatic relations contain possibilities of (paradigmatic) combinations by revealing rules that facilitate these combinations to be formed (Mick, 1986) and could be defined as elements followed by another in a sequence. Barthes (1990) studied in "The Fashion System" how ideas and ideologies are transmitted through clothing and fashion magazines' editorials in terms of signs. In this context the syntagmatic dimension regards the simultaneous juxtaposition of different elements in complete ensemble (Barthes, 1990, p. 167) such as shoes, pants, shirt, jacket and hat.

Paradigmatic signs are class of objects which gain their meaning from contrast to other signs (Rose, 2016, p. 120) and they reveal the oppositions and contrasts between signs. The differences are conveyed by selection done regarding which sign is chosen for an image and which isn't (Mick, 1986). The scene or photographic location may represent a focal paradigmatic choice with evident impact on the interpretation of an image or a photograph. According to Barthes (1990), paradigmatic elements are defined as items which cannot be worn at the same part of a body, such as sneakers, flip flops, boot, high heels.

A photograph is a syntagma that involves paradigmatic choices. As stated in Sub-chapter 3.4. by substituting and selecting visual elements it is possible to convey different messages using photograph and the knowledge from semiotics in accurate and savvy manner. Visual structuring as Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) call it and the arrangement of elements of a picture will impact its interpretation. The visual cues and messages exist for those who have the means to appropriate them (Rose, 2016). Conscious and sensitive viewers can "read" these cues and recognize what has been selected and excluded. According to McCracken (1987), when consumers read an advertisement, they look at symbolic resources, new ideas and better concrete versions of old ideas. Both paradigmatic and syntagmatic choices provide similarity and contrast which in terms of advertisements or photographs may be the trigger to arouse interesting tension and build the vision of the unexpected by capturing the consumer's attention.

Advertising is a constant search of culturally relevant and resonant sign combinations and fresh signification. **Bricolage** is a practice of

structured improvisation and symbolic expression by rearranging signifiers and the signified (Hebdige, 1989; Levi-Strauss, 1966). This concept mixes objects in novel, incompatible and disruptive ways resulting in reorganized stylistic meanings. In semiotic terms, it is a practice that creates new signs. Hebdige (1989) used the concept of bricolage to explain how subcultural styles were constructed. Style appeared as a space for intentional communication, self-expression and reflection to the world as well as opposition (Hebdige, 1989). Objects borrowed from disreputable contexts found a place in the new stylized ensembles, causing new meanings or erasing or subverting original meanings. (Clarke, 1976; Hebdige 1989.) Advertisers utilize the concept of bricolage by gathering the signs that convey reorganized stylistic meanings. This leads to the concept of counter bricolage with the common result that the original and sincere idea of bricolage is distanced from its original meaning. (Goldman et al., 1996.) Advertising creatives can be viewed as corporate bricoleurs whose task is to weave distinct elements together in a new image style (Goldman, 1992, p. 193–195). However, each advertiser, brand owner and image producer should be aware to not turn the practice of structured improvisation and cultural appropriation towards cultural misappropriation and acknowledge the responsibility that referencing is conducted in authentic and respected manner to its origin.

04.4 Signification: denotation & connotation

Signs function on both denotative (first-order meanings: direct and general) and connotative (second-order meanings: indirect and polysemic) levels depending on their level of symbolism (Rose, 2016). While Saussurean paradigmatic and syntagmatic concepts reveal how signs work within each other, the Barthian perspective is concerned with interactive ideas of meaning i.e. what the spectator brings within culture and personal experience to the reading process (Fiske 1992, p. 90). Denotative level can be referred to common sense and the obvious meaning of signs are fairly simple to decode (Fiske 1992: Rose 2016) and it can be viewed parallel to Saussure's constructive contexts of sign organization. In terms of analysis the denotative level regards recognizing and describing who or what kind of person is in an image and what they are doing.

Connotative meanings are assumed to be established after denotative meanings are recognized and interpreted (van Leeuwen et al. 2001, p. 97). At the superficial level most people recover the same denotative meanings when viewing advertising (Mick et al., 1992) while connotative meanings are more complex and open for different interpretations. The spectator brings the sociological aspect of the interaction process with common sense resembling the original intentions of the image producer, perhaps resulting in novel interpretations no longer tied to the original. Therefore, according to Ritson and Elliot (1995), advertising and its polysemic nature are derived from social, cultural and individual realms which the spectator imports to the "reading process" and as a result advertising audiences should not be viewed as



Figure 13. "Same things mean different things in different contexts ". 990's New Balance sneaker that was signature piece of Steve Jobs' style. The same sneaker was spotted at Copenhagen Fashion week 2017.

passive receivers that will interpret or “read” advertisement in pre-specifiable, intended ways. Connotation is an interactive process which occurs when the spectator brings emotions and feelings to the reading process along with values related to their culture (Fiske, 1992, p. 90) and is thus subjective. In terms of photography, denotation resolves what is photographed whereas connotation regards how something is photographed (Fiske, 1992, p.114). Connotation can be considered photographic style or selection of technical choices, such as framing, distance and lightning (van Leeuwen et al. 2001). However, it does not consist only of the technicalities of an image appearing less obvious and more implicit. Persons and objects shown in the image not only denote a particular individual, thing or place, but also attached ideas, concepts and culture. In photography, paradigmatic choices may strongly affect connotation, however such technical

choices should not impact the denotative interpretations (van Leeuwen et al. 2001).

How individuals interpret an advertisement depends on their uses for the interpreted meaning and as a result the interpretation of advertising is unique and may be different from the intended one (Bulmer et al., 2006). Different audiences bring different cultural competencies to their interpretation where the same codes are not necessarily employed in their “reading” (Bulmer et al., 2004). The interpretation is thus both related to visual elements chosen for the image and the cultural context the image is placed. According to Rose (2016, p. 45), to appreciate a work of art you need to be able to understand and interpret the styles it delivers, otherwise it means and matters little to the viewer. Thus, the meaning of an advert exists for those who have relation to signs embedded into it and as

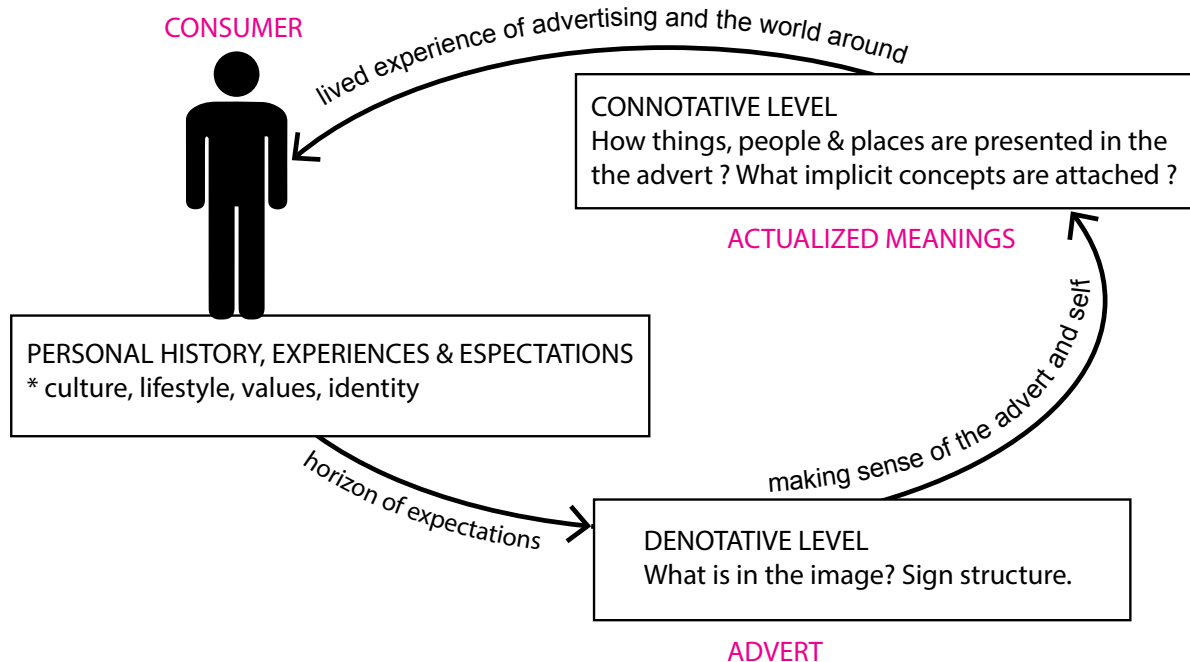


Figure 14. Meaning-based model of advertising experiences by Mick & Buhl (1992, 319). Modified.

a result adverts both exclude and include (Rose, 2016) and appear as selective and seductive. The “reading” therefore also has a personal level where the interpretation varies by the reader regarding what they see and bring to the reading process. To some extent, the meaning we find in images, photographs or adverts is subjective and unique.

04.5 Image & text

A text caption is often attached to adverts, which may both decrease confusion and extend the interpretation as meanings of an image appear as complex and multi-layered. The relationship between text and visual images may vary and it can be literal by directing our reading and helping to choose the correct perception or by guiding the spectator towards intended meanings of the image producer. Thus, the text may direct the interpretation process simply explaining what the photograph captures, why it was taken and how it should be read. (Fiske, 1992.)

According to Barthes (1977, p. 38 – 40), text can be considered as a duplicator of meanings of what is already interpreted, or it can deliver fresh information of an image. Barthes (1977) describes these functions of the linguistic message as anchorage and relay functions. When text is functions as an anchorage, such as a title of a photograph, it diminishes the number of meanings by guiding and quickening the interpretation process and by helping the spectator to choose from possible denotative interpretations (Rose, 2016, p. 121). According to Barthes (1977), the text may provide control for the spectator to select from floating chain of signifieds, the spectator avoiding others and receiving designated ones.

In the relay function, the relationship of text and image is complementary where both words and the image are considered as fragments of a more holistic syntagmatic interpretation in which text functions as one important element extending the interpretation rather than simply confirming it. (Barthes, 1977.)

04.6 Image production: art directing & advertising

In the following chapter the focus lies on the ways that brand owners, marketers or professionals working with brand images, manage the visual cues delivered through advertising. Art directing is used when referring to the person in charge of the overall visual appearance and supervising and unifying this vision. Thus, it refers to the particular expertise required in the selection process of visual cues, signs and artistic styles. It can be presumed that this type image producer aims for interpretations somewhat controlled by the author of an image. However, spectators themselves bring cultural associations to the “reading process” of an image or advert which affects their individual interpretations and makes the adverts polysemic (Sturken et al. 2009, p. 55). Therefore, adverts are no exception in the meaning-making process and are open to cultural interpretations.

Referring to Sub-chapter 3.2. and to arguments by Fischer (2017), in order to appear authentic, brands must be connected to culture that matters to target segments and place the target audience on a first place whether through the stories that connects to them or how they connect with the stories. This requires knowing the culture and being connected to it. As Fisher

pointed out, all actions should be audience driven and engagement should be linked to communication that is valuable to the audience. Thus, there should appear some agreement of shared consciousness of the culture and lifestyle that both brand and the audience are willing to be connected to. This consciousness is what image producers need to tackle using their trained sense of what will and what will not work and translate it into visual forms.

The movement from product to brand requires semiotic transformation which can be achieved through visual articulation and through advertisement (Kornberger, 2010; McCracken 1986). Thus, brands are created in adverts and through signs that are selected for ads. Art directing and composing an image of an advert is bringing up the individual visual elements, the signs, together into a coherent and meaningful whole. These fragments and visual choices consequently form holistic syntagmatic interpretations which preferably resonate with consumers and affect some level of recognition. The author of an image may not control the interpretation of the spectator, but the visual expertise and acknowledging semiotic practices of advertising should prevent harmful interpretations of the brand and provide better qualifications to gain the meanings originally written in the script. In terms of art directing the selection process of visual cues decides how the culturally constituted world is to be portrayed in the advertisement and which objects are used to evoke particular meanings of an advertisement (McCracken, 1986) and thus, bring the world and object together. According to Kornberger (2010, p.134), the same object has different meanings in different contexts and therefore the type of “world” constructed, and signs selected are

crucial in the semiotic transformation process. This thesis aims to grasp this “world” or context built around the product and thus, the focus is to explore the significance of context and the “context design” without actually changing anything physical in the product itself. The term “visual frame” is created to describe this process.

Image producers employ strategies that are not the only solutions but represent outcomes of intention, trained skill and sense of what could work (van Leeuwen et al., 2001). The selection process involves both conscious and intuitive decisions regarding whether the advert will be realistic, artful or fantasy type, located in an interior or exterior, urban or rural environment as well as regarding the time of year and day. If people appear in the advert, age, sex, status, class and occupation impact its interpretation along with the clothing and body postures of the models. This selection process can be performed both successfully or less so depending on the person's or creative team's skillset behind the advert. (McCracken, 1986.)

When consumers read advertisements, they look at symbolic resources, new ideas, and improved or fixed versions of familiar ideas (McCracken, 1987, p. 122). The reading process is also performed in relation to other adverts regarding both similarity and difference (Rose, 2016). When signs are combined into visual forms the image producer grasps the tension between familiarity and unexpected, similarity and difference. The selection of signs and the potential tension they construct may function as triggers to the spectator and engaging template to the brand.

05. Art directing: project "Visual Frames"

As stated in previous section, semiotics is a system of signs that both exposes the deconstruction of meaning similar to decoding and describes the process of constructing the meaning, similar to encoding (Schroeder, 2002; Goldman et al., 1996). By increasing our aesthetic judgment through semiotics and learnings from decoding practices, the knowledge of encoding likely extends resulting more consistent image production. Therefore, the learnings from the literature view aroused my interest to tackle encoding and image structuring. I wanted to observe the image-making and art directing further and reflect the literature view in a visual

manner and to achieve in-depth knowledge to conduct the advert analysis presented later in Chapter 8.

Visual Frames – project should be viewed as a reflective platform for the observations related to decoding and as visual space for encoding, iteration and testing. The project studies image-making process through premediated expressive ambitions and styles. Visual Frames project is not created to serve certain brand or brand strategies, in turn, it explores the manageability of image production, the role of improvisation, the relation between idea and

outcome, in which the aestheticization of style is placed at the forefront. Thus, the project pursues to achieve holistic knowledge of image production and explore aesthetic competencies useful in brand communication.

Visual Frames project relies on the foundational questions of this thesis, what the context does for the product and how the same things mean different things in different contexts? The project consists of a series of photographs taken from white blank t-shirts by aiming to create an expressive display for the product commonly viewed as mundane. In turn, the white ordinary t-shirt is selected as an object for the observations to release more attention to connotations such as photographic style, mood or selection of technical choices, such as framing, distance, and lighting. The styling of a model is not on a priority, to release the attention to other elements essential for impression and other editorial choices made, the habitus and presence each model delivers via photographs.

The project consists of two photographer collaborations. The first part of the project was conducted together with photographer Olga Poppius during August – November in 2018. This series of photographs concentrate on studying the essence of casting for image construction and aesthetic impressions, while the format and distance of the photographs remain rather moderate and consistent. Photographic pairs instead, provide a comparison to nuances happening in the gaze and pose of the model. The background and locations vary from studio settings to outdoors within the image couples.

The second part of the project was conducted with photographer Hayley Lee in September 2019. Imagery studies the dynamics between

location and person wearing the white t-shirt and the balance between. On the other hand, the photographs study small nuance variations underlining their impact on the perception through the taken close-ups. These images explore the breaking points in the perception and meaning transfer process by posing questions: how a minor change in the photograph affects the mood, feel and overall perception? How much does it take to pull the focus from the object to elsewhere? And when the body will start dominating the image?

The term "visual frame" in this project regards photographic style, technicalities and framing and editorial choices made before and during the image creation. Therefore, the "visual frame" represents the mental concept created around the physical product that appears beyond "a person in a white t-shirt".

Visual Frames – project should be viewed as a visual reflection diary. In the following project, outcomes are introduced. Each section has a small introduction of the premediated concepts behind the photo creation. However, the series of images presented next, function as visual platforms for testing and therefore the outcomes are encouraged to be viewed as conclusions themselves. Thus, the visual offering the images contain should be observed by looking, not by telling. Despite the project is derived from premediated concepts that regard aesthetic ambitions, it should be noted that the interest is not on superficialities providing visual suggestions of beauty or how the beauty looks and seduces, instead it stresses how each photograph manages to reach the expressive element and how the expression varies within the photo collection.

VISUAL FRAMES

with photographer
OLGA POPPIUS

Catalog

This photo pair functions as a starting point for the whole project and with the aimed catalog-style these photographs represent the most controlled and modest photos of the project, in terms of the expressions beyond "a person in a white t-shirt". This photoshoot was an intention to imitate the ordinary fashion catalog style that represents the product (the t-shirt in this case), in a commercial, appealing and accessible manner. White background, bright lightning, studio setting and general pose of the model with the gaze towards camera underlining the premediated concept of catalog-style.





Fashion

This photo couple studies the concept of fashion photography by exploring the critical points when photographic impression turns towards over posed parody, superimposed or even vulgar. The photo couple studies the possibilities to generalize fashionable photograph style and clichés appearing in this genre.





Art-like

This photographic concept relies on the appearance and habitus the model delivers through the photographs. The intensity and intimacy are created through minimalism and dark background is used to bring drama to the photographs. Compared this photo series to the first photo couple that feature the catalog style, the denotation could be viewed to be the same, however the expressive tones and impressions differ due casting and the opposite studio settings. These photos rather take their inspiration from art-like photos and are tried to be distanced from regular commercial photos.





Sketchy

This concept is inspired by snapshot photography, which can be described as spontaneous, quickly shot and as a genre that has no artistic intent. This type of photography can appear amateurish and technically imperfect. This concept is an attempt to imitate these typical characteristics established in a snapshot. The photo couple aims to create references to mobile photography and randomness. The aimed photographic aesthetic is derived from a hard light referring to the flashlight of the mobile phone and “whatever” the location happens to be the set-up of the shoot. The photo couple intends to create an impression of an arbitrary photo that could be a result of the spontaneous act. It tackles on sketchiness and how this feature could function as an accelerator for interest and as an interesting intentional aesthetic.





Urban

The photoshoot relies on common elements seen in street-style fashion photography where the background (location) connotes to urban elements and the expression of the model is dull, however simultaneously immodest. In these photos the urban element is the roll-up door, however, it could be also a concrete wall or any other industrial element. The photographs are taken from low ankle to underline the common take used in this type of photographs and the self-assertive look of the model. A spontaneous smile breaks this impression by turning it softer, instead edgy appearance.





VISUAL FRAMES

with photographer
HAYLEY LÊ

Garment vs. Body

The photo couple studies the point when the body starts dominating the image and the attention is pulled from the white t-shirt to the body. Generally, the female neck can be considered as a sensual and even erotized area which in these images, together with the white t-shirt, is competing from the attention of the spectator. Thus, these close-ups are testing what a small movement in the neck and clavicle area does for the perception, mood, and expression.





Poetic

This concept regards three photos. The photo series is an attempt to compose the type of photos where the aesthetics aspires to create poetic mood and style. The first photo couple relies on close-ups where the camera goes close to the person, partly leaving the face hidden due to the cropping and camouflage created by the shadows of the leaves. These images regard dim light and soft shadows. The color scheme appears soft due to the quality of light appearing in the shot moment.

In the third image, the camera is distanced showing the person as a whole and undisguised. The composition of light, color scheme and shadows are different causing a disparate tone to the image compared to the photo couple.









Person vs. Environment

This photoshoot was executed architectonically in a peculiar location – in Merihaka. The photo couple studies the relation, dynamics, and attention between the young man wearing the white t-shirt and the location itself. Distinctive for Merihaka is the ugly aesthetic it represents; the rugged and robust buildings and concrete material that dominates the environment. Merihaka is a relatively common location for lifestyle photoshoots, therefore the location itself has the ability to convert the connotations toward this genre. Images rely on the trademarks of the location.





Moment

This concept is inspired by street photography that can be described as a genre that pursues to isolate a moment that otherwise could be ignored and aspires to record everyday life in a public place. A common feature for street photography is, that the people are unaware they are photographed.

These photos are an attempt to create an impression of an unstaged moment that could be viewed as aesthetically interesting. Compared to snapshot photography and the concept titled "Sketchy" presented earlier, this photo couple consists of different type of aesthetic ambitions and quality in terms of technicalities. Regarding this photo couple, the reflection from the window competes with the photo composition behind. The reflection can be viewed as both disturbing and providing an extra layer for the image reading. However, it distances the spectator from the object, the young man wearing the white t-shirt, by scattering the attention and perception.





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06. Data & methods

In this chapter, first the data selection process is introduced. Second, the methodology and actions to conduct the semiotic analysis are discussed. As stated previously, the interpretation of images is related to the cultural context where the images appear and the visual choices the image consists of. The image itself and the cultural atmosphere where the images appear form the cornerstones of the study. The cultural context, the sneaker culture, is later explored in Chapter 7. Through the semiotic advert analysis, this thesis pursues showcasing the complex processes of meaning as well as how meanings

are multi-layered, implicit and surrounded by the culture.

06.1 Data

In semiotic analysis, choosing the adverts represents no common selection method. This thesis holds no interest concerning the medium where the sneaker adverts are published. The focus of interest lies on the image itself, its relation to other images and on the culture from which images are derived. According to Williamson (1978), in order to analyze an image, it is relevant to consider it in contrast to and in relation to other images. Thus, adverts do not solely acquire their meaning within the advert itself but also from the contrast with others. The crucial questions posed by Rose (2016) are how these other adverts should be methodologically identified and how to identify the relevant relation to those constituting the case study. In this thesis, the relation is based on product innovation and newness of the sneaker category within the competitive landscape of 2016 sneaker companies.

In the following section, the advertising selection process is detailed case by case. At the beginning of this study, the sneaker scene was explored and the study of defining and discovering innovative and field changing sneaker styles of the year 2016 began. Defining the “it sneaker” of 2016 and early 2017 became the first guiding principle of the advert selection process. The selected sneaker styles were identified based on online articles and magazines published in the sneaker scene. The advert selection was led by the “it sneaker” and the advertising campaign built around it.

ADIDAS NMD

The Adidas silhouette, NMD, which is short for “nomad” was introduced globally on December

2015. The shoe was released in a wide range of colors shortly after it was introduced in March 2016 (Danforth, 2016). According to Adidas CEO Herbert Hainer, in the brand’s quarterly earnings report the NMD sold over 400,000 pairs on March 17th alone (Hypebeast, 2017). The Adidas NMD has become one of the most popular lifestyle shoes on the market as well as a centerpiece for Adidas sneaker collaborations. December of 2015 has been described as a game-changing day that created a foundational piece for a whole new category. The Adidas NMD developed into one of the brand’s signature silhouettes, like the Roshe was to Nike when introduced back in 2012. (Sneaker News, 2016.)

The March 2016 launch contained 6-day event in East London. For the launch of NMD, the venue was transformed into a dystopian underground-style labyrinth called a futurehouse and included six days of music, film, talks and workshops (Hypebeast, 2016). Futurehouse venue has been described as a “celebration of creativity across the spectrum, designed to inspire a new generation of Londoners” (Garside, 2016). While exploring the NMD advertisement related to the March release and launch venue, it was noted that a wide range of online studies were required to discover the crucial campaigns around the NMD sneakers since they seemed to be driven by the future house launch event rather than more conventional take on sneaker advertising. However, it turned out that an exclusive London-focused fashion shoot was built around the London launch and one of the campaign images ended up in the case study.

NEW BALANCE 247

New Balance differs from the other two sneaker companies being still family owned as does its approach to new sneaker releases. The company's marketing budgets also differ from those of Adidas and Puma which likely impacts the online news coverage and visibility of releases (Ocampo, 2017). On January 7th, New Balance launched 247 Luxe kit, which was considered to be significant and innovate silhouette in New Balance sneaker category (Schlemmer, 2016) and a counter to new silhouette development started by Adidas NMD. The 247 Luxe sneakers published on the cover of January 2017 print issue of Sneaker magazine. According to Brian Lynn, New Balance's Senior Product Manager of Global Lifestyle: "the 247 luxe pack represents a combination of premium, quality materials and craftsmanship combined with sophisticated styling and superior comfort" (Solebox, 2017). The most fundamental feature is considered to be its comfort based on NB's long-rooted expertise in cushioning (Ocampo, 2017). The 247 silhouette have had several releases after January 2017 and has become one of the key styles of New Balance's offerings.

The 247 Luxe kit release campaign and the advertising related to it constituted the second reference to the case study selection.

PUMA - CREEPER

Puma Creeper was selected as shoe of the year in 2016 based on retail sales, consumer feedback, social media prowess and overall buzz by Sneaker News which has granted awards since 2014 when Kanye West was awarded the year before with the Yeezy Boost 350 Adidas

sneakers. "The launch of the Creeper has been game-changing for women's sneaker fashion," stated Natalie Ellis, VP and GM at Six:02, which is Foot Locker's concept specialized for offering for women. (Allen, 2016.) The award was widely acknowledged on online platforms such as Hypebae.com, Highsnobiety.com, Vanityfair.com and Vogue.com and the award made Puma a serious competitor by creating strategic entrance to the market focusing on women.

In December 2015, Puma launched their first-ever sneaker collaboration called the Fenty Creeper. The Creeper silhouette consists of brand's classic suede model and blends it with the music and fashion feel of the punk era of the '80s with a bulky sole unit. To showcase the new collaboration, PUMA and Rihanna partnered with rapper / producer Travi\$ Scott to further highlight the first-ever PUMA by Rihanna campaign (Danforth, 2016). This launch campaign was the first selection for the case study, and its advertising campaign promoted by Rihanna with Travis Scott was selected to be one of the three adverts to be analyzed.



Figure 15. Adidas Nmd, release March, 2016.



Figure 16. New Balance 247 Luxe kit, release December, 2016.



Figure 17. Puma by Rihanna, Fenty Creeper, release September 2015

06.2 Methods

The method of this study is semiotic advertising analysis, which provides in-depth understanding of the meaning constructions and how these indirect and layered meanings are constructed within the culture. This thesis utilizes terminology established in semiotics, semiotic analysis and decoding as a method to improve skills regarding image production and encoding. Thus, the same strategies used in the semiotic analysis can be viewed as beneficial in terms of brand communication and the semiotic vocabulary providing useful tools to describe and explain the meaning production processes.

This analysis intends to determine how the selected adverts operate in the field of sign construction, to define the signifier-signified relationship and outline the stylistic formulas and logic of sign articulation that appears in each advert. The focus is to define and expose these implicit meanings derived from cultural conventions and sign constructions transferred in the meaning-making process. Thus, the goal of this study is to grasp image compositions and visual choices made around the product and demonstrate the semiotic transformation through the decoding processes. According to Goldman et al. (1996, p. 5-7), the desirability of an image i.e. the sign value can be described as the relative value of a brand when functional differences between products are minimal. The athletic shoe industry has been considered to be a suitable example of the parity industry, where product feature differences are minimal, and the difference is created in the image creation process (Goldman et al. 1993).

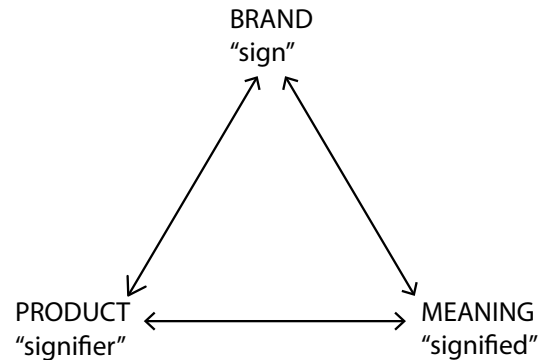


Figure 18. Sign value mechanism, based on Goldman & Papson (1993)

The guiding principles for the analysis are presented in Sub-chapter 4.4. and Figure 13 showcases how the reading moves from one level to another. The analysis requires the denotative meaning to be established before moving to connotative levels of meaning. However, the analysis does not proceed fully linear manner as the personal knowledge and social context make the process iterative. Once denotation is established layer of recognition, second-order meaning, the connotation, surfaces through the cultural associations, the way people, things and places are presented in the image (van Leeuwen et al., 2001, p. 97). The analysis structure is presented later in Chapter 8.

Connotation and denotation are fundamental to the advert analysis as this thesis aims to explain how adverts mean and what they mean. However, the focus lies on the connotative level as according to Hall (1980), it exposes the ideological status and social effects of visual material by revealing unconscious multi-layered meanings. Part of the ideological effect of advertising is derived from adverts' intention to distinguish products from their competitors (Williamson, 1978). Therefore, in order to analyze

one advert, all three adverts are contrasted and related to each other.

To be able to gain further understanding of selected adverts and define how they mean and what they mean, their cultural atmosphere where the adverts appear is outlined in the analysis. As stated, visual reading is related to the cultural context as semiotic resources become meaningful according to the cultural lens used by the viewer (Holt et al., 1997). According to Williamson (1978, p.17), we can understand what images such as adverts mean only by defining how they work in relation to the broader context of meanings that are culturally constituted. Therefore, the ability to read (decode) the selected adverts requires knowledge of the cultural nuances. The medium where the selected adverts are established is ignored and in turn, outlining cultural atmosphere forms another fundament for analysis along with denotation and connotation. The comprehension of the cultural lens through which the images appear is considered to be as important as the image itself and the system of signs within other images. The sneaker culture is overviewed in the following Chapter 7, exploring and describing the lens through which the selected adverts are decoded in the semiotic analysis.

07. Cultural lens of the study

As stated in Sub-chapter 3.2. interpretation of advertisement depends on the contexts and individual, social and cultural structures. Therefore, culture functions as a framework of interpretation and impacts on advertising meaning transformation by bringing the product and a representation of culturally constituted world together in the advertisement (Mick & Buhl, 1992; McCracken, 1986). From this chapter onwards, this thesis aims to explore and describe the cultural landscape of sneakers that involves lifestyles, subcultures and the sign system therein. Thus, this cultural landscape forms a focal standpoint for advert analysis that will

be presented later in Chapter 8. As Moisander et al. (2006, p. 88) states, the interpretation of adverts cannot be performed based solely on visual elements as an isolated symbolic system, but instead the adverts need to be analyzed in a wider cultural context.

Culture is the lens through which interpretations are generated and filtered and the cultural approach in marketing relies on the idea that companies' success depends on understanding, managing and appropriating cultural signs and symbols which can be converted into visual forms and coherent brand appearances resonating

with consumer (Moisander et al., 2006). The brand (company) and consumer should be same minded and have an authentic connection to a particular culture to enable the brand to appear relevant and engaging (Fisher, 2017).

In the following chapter the current sport industry and sneaker culture are presented. It is not possible to convey the sneaker culture in its entirety, however the current developments and turns that have impacted on the transformation from subculture to pop-culture are introduced.

07.1 The remix of current sport industry - sneakers and fashion

The sneaker industry has become an emerging mass-consumer business that used to be known as an underground street culture. International sneaker market has grown by more than 40% within last ten years (Weinswig, 2016). In 2017 U.S. sneaker sales rose 2% to \$19.6 billion, according to NPD (2018). This current turn has occurred rapidly as the culture emerges into the digital world by altering the common structures of the market. Social media has had a significant impact on the speed and manner in which the news of sneaker launches are spread by turning the hobbyist curiosity into a worldwide phenomenon. According to Battle (2016), social media's rise results the decline of big budget commercials causing the sneaker industry to turn to social media and social influencers. Sneaker launches are mobilized and purchasing a pair of sneakers is one click away while the old-school method was to queue and wait for the brick-and-mortar store to open. The business model has changed, and companies rely on the web to push

products. The offline community has become online by making the sneaker culture mobile, accessible and global.

The global sports and apparel industries have become highly fragmented as the line between sports apparel and fashion apparel becomes increasingly blurred, encouraging more collaboration between sporting and fashion industries (O'Connell, 2017). In 2003 Adidas was the first to launch a widely acknowledged fashion collaboration with Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto which later became permanent collaboration called Y-3. The collaboration featured a dialogue regarding how sportswear could appear in the future. This collaboration followed by another when Stella McCartney debuted with Adidas in 2004 and resulted Adidas by Stella McCartney collection with an unconventional take on sport-wear and broke the norm of traditional women's training clothing. (McCall, 2016.) These two collaborations extended the perception of the sport industry and what could be done within it by breaking the wall between fashion and sportswear. Such long-standing partnerships have simultaneously cleared the way for other sport brands to benefit from such collaborations which have become settled disciplines to incorporate an additional edge and creativity for sport brands.

In terms of sign value, sneaker advertising has commonly relied on sport and entertainment celebrities while focusing on technology of the shoe design and advertising style. However, the social meaning signified by the sneaker brand is consequential to the success in sneaker industry. (Goldman et al., 1996, p. 38-43.) Sneakers and hip-hop culture have been in natural sync and unified to bear a social signification due the



Figure 19. Run-DMC in Hollis Queens, New York 1986



Figure 20. Run-DMC at Hammersmith Odeon, 1986

culture, lifestyle and community they represent. Furthermore, hip hop and fashion have become common partners over the past decade and the idea of a rapper working with a major brand has more or less become a norm. However, when Adidas and Run-DMC united in the late 1980s when “My Adidas” was released in 1986, this norm did not yet exist. Run-DMC became one of the first performers to strike a sneaker endorsement deal which was worth of 1M dollars. (Warnett, 2016.) However, the deal was uncommon compared to current ones as the song was first made, and the deal rose later as an organic campaign. The Adidas shoe was brought to the spotlight due to love for the shoe while commercial value was earned later. In recent years, the sneaker industry has launched several artist collaborations such as Kanye with Adidas, Drake and Nike’s Jordan brand, Rihanna with Puma—all showing how the global audience follows trends set by hip hop artists rather than traditional athletes.

While the sport industry has become diversified towards fashion and relies on artist collaborations, luxury brands have simultaneously noticed how street- and sportswear have taken their place by shaking the conventional structures of fashion. Shortly after, rappers Pharrell, Kanye, A\$AP Rocky, and Travis Scott were included in designer collaborations with fashion luxury brands. A\$AP Rocky was announced to collaborate with Dior’s ad campaign in 2016 (Indiana, 2016). This was followed by Travis Scott collaborating with the Austrian clothing brand Helmut Lang as the collaboration was announced in early 2017 (Krastz, 2017). One of the multiple Pharrell Williams’ collaborations launched in 2017 when Chanel, Adidas and Pharrell launched an Adidas NMD sneaker edition called “Human Race”, with one pair of sneakers costing 1000€ (Danforth,

2017). The sign traffic between fashion, hip-hop and street style and sport has mixed the traditions and perceptions by expanding existing boundaries.

Both luxury and sport companies aim to cash in on the booming market and the sneaker category is no exception. The rise of luxury sneakers is outcome of the growing influence of streetwear in high-end fashion and vice versa as it is now acceptable to wear pair of kicks with a well-tailored suit. High-end brands such as Gucci, Prada and Balenciaga increasingly strive for growth with sneakers competing with more traditional sportswear giants such as Nike, Puma and Adidas. Price wise a premium sneaker can range from \$400 to \$3000 compared to limited-edition sport sneakers with similar price tags. (Segreti, 2018.) Sneakers have become significant drivers of the luxury shoe business and if luxury brands desires to stay relevant it commonly aims to tap into street styles to freshen up their looks and cash in the sneaker category by creating their own version of “chunky” premium sneakers.

As the walls between sport and fashion rumble the current fusion of sport and fashion industries have impacted both product design and visual communication manners expanding the companies’ creative environments. The interconnection of fashion and sport has injected diversity into sport brands’ appearance releasing an expressive element to communicate the brand. According to Nike’s president Trevor Edwards: “It is still a great performance product, but the expression of it is much more important. Constantly changing that expression and giving new looks, new experiences, is a key part of what we do. One of the things that we recognise, certainly in the (women’s) business, is that there



Figure 21. Takeoff, Quavo and Offset of Migos at the Met Gala 2017 in matching Versace tuxedos



Figure 22. The Balenciaga Triple S released September 2017. One version of chunky luxury sneaker. The anti-beauty aesthetic and silhouette of bulky sneaker arrived 2017 and has become more prominent ever since.

is no performance without style". (Mellery-Pratt, 2015.) Thus, expression has become an important feature in terms of branding aesthetics, however giant sport brands still remain sport rooted and focusing on performance and innovation. Dirk Schönberger, the creative director of Adidas' sport style division argues: "The success generated from this fusion is not wholly financial; it's how people are starting to look at the brand (=Adidas). It helps us to create a lot of energy for the brand. And, it makes people look again, on a deeper level, at the (Adidas) product." (Mellery-Pratt, 2015.)

As stated in Sub-chapter 3.3. where the term bricolage was introduced, the landscape of advertising and branding aesthetics regarding sign value is about creating a new perspective to something known. Sport and fashion fusion provide one way to operate within the industry. According to Goldman et al. (1996, p. 257), regarding the system of signs, it is a question of stylistic expressions, realm of styles as well as blending, recycling and splicing together signifiers' previous images and styles. Rappers and high fashion and sneakers' entrance into high fashion, exemplifies sign traffic from one context to another where the signifier travels towards new signified.

07.2 Case study companies

The case companies New Balance, Adidas and Puma are introduced in the following section. The decision to involve these companies in the study was based on their long history in the sport industry as well as how the companies have evolved over times. The selected companies operate in the global mass market and have

shaped the current sport industry. On some level all of them companies have blurred the lines between sport and fashion, athletic style and leisure. Regarding their recent sneaker developments and related advert campaigns, the evaluation criteria is derived from the idea of the newness of sneaker design and how both campaign and design have cultivated this category in the current sport industry.

07.2.1 Adidas

In 1924 Adidas was founded by Adolf Dassler along with his brother in a small German village called Herzogenaurach where the company began producing soccer and running shoes. The company name represents a short version of Adolf- Adi Dassler who is the founder of the company. Lina Radke in 1928 in Amsterdam and Jesse Owens in 1936 in Berlin where the two Olympic gold medalists who made the brand more famous and known at the beginning. Jesse Owens's trainers featured two widely spaced stripes that later become a signature a guideline for Adidas shoe design and a commonplace design feature of a sport trainer. (Adidas, 2017.) The Dassler family has a long-rooted history in trainers as Adi's brother Rudolf took his own way to create the Puma brand in 1948 after a controversy with Adi (Reference for business, 2017).

The three-stripes that made the trainers recognizable were originally bought from Karhu Sports for the worth of 1600€ and two bottles of whiskey. The designs for shoes were registered in 1949 which incorporated the three stripes that became a trademark of the company. (Welty, 2014.) The three-stripe motif has followed the company's appearance ever since and

established a vital design feature of apparel collections among the company logos.

In 2019, Adidas Group's net sales were 23.64 billion euros of which footwear accounted for 57 percent (O'Connel, 2020). Adidas is built on performance gear, however the brand has become a mash-up of sport, fashion and attitude. The company has been able to create an image that consists of sports, street, music and pop culture alongside fashion statements.

07.2.2 New Balance

New Balance Athletics, Inc. is manufacturer of athletic shoes, apparel and accessories. The company was founded in 1906 by William J. Riley, who immigrated to America from England in the same year the company was established. The company is Boston based. New Balance gained its reputation by selling arch supports to firefighters and policemen and the athletic footwear followed in 1938. The trainer that was launched back then was made for runners from a crepe sole and a black kangaroo leather upper. Because the fit, performance and quality were key drivers for the company, New Balance became known for offering its shoes in different widths. The company pursued a market niche through more specialized offering while general market opinion was that all feet should fit the same standardized fit and the wide offering was first considered to be complicated by buyers. The first wide sneaker "Trackster" was offered on the market in 1960. (Welty, 2012.)

The game changer of the field was the "320" trainer which first introduced the current N - letter logo as company signature in the 1970's. Styling aside, the 320 was a bold statement

to the running world that New Balance was a serious contender. The design of 320 was ranked to number one in Runner's World just after the styles was released. (Sneaker Freaker, 2013.) The company became known for its performance trainers for running and later for its lifestyle sneakers. As a result, New Balance firstly is an athletic brand based on performance products with a lifestyle division that evolves from this original ideology of comfort and performance. Unlike the common approach to sneaker branding strategies, New Balance has eluded celebrity endorsement for decades enforced by their campaign slogan "Endorsed By No One." However, in 2009 the company wanted to evolve and finally allow athletes to endorse the brand. (Welty, 2012.)

In 2018, New Balance net sales were 4,5 billion US dollars i.e. 4,14 billion euros (Harris, 2018). Currently New Balance has still its core on athletic shoes and the performance, however the company has diversified its offering from making athletic shoes to apparel and accessories from a variety of athletic activities to more casual, street driven use.

07.2.3 Puma

As stated in Sub-chapter 7.2.1. Pumas roots lie on the same history as Adidas due to a disagreement between the brothers and until in a final split Rudolf Dassler founded the Puma Schuhfabrik Rudolf Dassler. The company was officially registered in 1948. The company focus was placed on football as Puma's first football shoe "Atom" was launched in the same year. Several members of the West Germany national team wore Puma's in the first post-war football match against Switzerland in 1950, including

Herbert Burdenski, who scored West Germany's first post-war and winning goal. (Reference for business, 2017.)

The logo with the jumping cat was established in 1967 by a cartoonist from Nuremberg and received a new variation in 1979 remaining its appearance ever since. Puma's significant shoe designs dropped out in 1999 when "Mostro" was launched. This sneaker was an outcome of upcoming trend fusing sports and lifestyle. In 2001 formula-one originated shoe "Speedcat" was launched. The sneaker was originally designed in 1998 to serve F1 pilots and due this, the original version was made to be fireproof. (Puma Group, 2017.)

In 2019, Puma generated a global revenue of roughly 5.5 billion euros of which footwear accounted 46.4 percent (O'Connel, 2020). The company has been establishing a reputation as a supplier for top athletes. During its history it has been tied to professional footballers, runners and tennis players such as Brazilian professional footballer Pelé, American tennis player Serena Williams and current ambassador Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt (Puma Group, 2017). In its recent marketing strategies, the company has started to fuse the fashion and sport by adopting contemporary R'n'B singer Rihanna as company's brand ambassador and creative director for shoe and textile collections (Luckerson, 2014). Through this strategic move, it targets female audiences and aims to gain diversity in its appearance and product lines, shifting from top athletes towards pop culture and music. The company has also collaborated with fashion designers such as Hussein Chalayan and Alexander McQueen.

08. Analysis

In this chapter the structure of the analysis and semiotic interpretation are presented. As stated in Sub-chapter 4.1., any meaning-making device can be regarded as a sign, and therefore number of signs in representation can be infinite. The analysis is thus concerned spelling out the types of signs that exhaust most of the meaning-making potential of the representations as well as those with the strongest resonance with cultural connotation in the context of sneaker culture.

As stated in Sub-chapter 1.2., this thesis is concerned with exploring the context where the product is placed which in this thesis is

translated into a “visual frame” to describe the mental concept created around the product and transformation process from physical product towards expressions and styles. The structure of the semiotic analysis is based on the meaning-based model presented in Figure 13., in where advertising experiences were presented as a dynamic loop consisting of three aspects that contribute to our reading of advertisement – personal, denotative and connotative level. However, as this study is concerned about the aesthetic power of adverts and explores art directing, the stylistic layer is added to make the analysis structure complete. By adding the fourth

element, is an attempt to expose and define the aesthetic concepts and image design formulas used in image production, rather solely relying on structural order and sign composition.

The structure of the semiotic analysis consists of:

- Personal layer – to see, we must know. To look, we must be motivated. This layer consists of lived experiences, expectations and the culture surrounding us.
- Denotative layer – answering the question “who or what is being depicted here?”.
- Connotative layer – answering the question “how they mean, what they mean”? Thus, persons and objects depicted in the image do not solely denote a particular individual, thing or place, but also attached ideas, concepts and culture.
- Stylistic layer – answering the question “how has something been photographed”? This layer contains stylistic approaches and technical adjustments involved in the image structuring i.e. style of signification.

As stated in Chapter 4, the vocabulary used in semiotics provides a structure to conduct the analysis, where the sign forms the basic building block of the whole meaning transfer process. Printed advertisements consist of pre-selected editorial choices and in semiotic terminology the advertisement is a syntagma of visual elements, the signifiers. A set of signs taken together in an image means something to us (van Leeuwen et al., 2001, p. 76) and the presented sign selection aspires to gain particular meanings for the spectator. The selection process of signs regards

what is taken into images and how the sign ensemble is presented in the image to create certain stylistic expressions. In the following section, the visual elements of adverts and the signs that exhaust most of the meaning-making potential are decoded, concepts and cultural realms attached to them are explored and stylistic expressions are defined.

08.1 Analysis of Adidas Nmd London

DENOTATIVE LEVEL

The image was taken in a location where the daylight does not reach and where the style of the location is industrial, rugged and raw since it consists of elements such as asphalt, concrete and fluorescent lamps. The location appears to be a tunnel and could be an exit of a parking garage. At the end of the tunnel natural light is shown, which suggests the photo is taken at daytime.

The image depicts two persons, a young white male and black female, both are looking over their shoulder to the camera, showing their backside instead. Models are positioned facing the tunnel exit and the female is gazing directly at the camera while the male looks at the female. The female's foot is slightly bent while the male's body is quite rigid. Both are wearing Adidas pieces, with the male wearing black tonal trefoil logo hoodie and black tapered sweatpants. The white narrow horizontal line between the hoodie and pants shows he is wearing a white shirt under the hoodie. The female is wearing a black short tank dress decorated with three white stripes on the side. The trefoil and three stripes



Figure 23. Analysed advert: Adidas NMD London campaign image

are classical symbols of Adidas brand. Both are wearing sneakers and the three black stripes are recognizable from the males' sneakers side profile. The white outsole base color isolates both sneakers from the dark asphalt by making them stand out in the image and showing embedded color block features.

The format of the image is a landscape. Based on the cropping of the image, both the female and male occupy an even amount of space of the image. The persons are focusing on posing for the camera while keeping their gaze towards their own targets. The image lacks a wide range of colors and the overall color impression is desaturated and soft.

The rectangle shaped area at the bottom-right corner is reserved for text elements, where "NMD_LONDON" is written with capital letters and underscored between the words. Two narrow strokes isolate and highlight the text from other elements. Above the upper stroke is the trefoil logo and "ADIDAS ORIGINALS" written in small capital letters while #MYFUTUREIS / @ADIDASUK / NMD is written below the other stroke and under the text NMD_LONDON. The role of the text in the advert is less literal. As Barthes (1977) stated, text can be viewed as one fragment of a more holistic interpretation by extending the interpretation. The text "LONDON" confirms the possible place where the photo is taken yet gives London a more significant role in the image. The text "NMD" refers to the sneaker style. However, to understand this the spectator must know what NMD stands for. The #, @ and _ are characters commonly used in social marketing campaigns.

CONNOTATIVE LEVEL

London – In this particular advert the text (NMD_LONDON), the photoshoot location (tunnel) and model casting form a cohesive ensemble of signs which all "speak" London. The text NMD_LONDON forms a headline for the image content and prevents the signs to start travel recklessly. Due to this "headline", the location is understood to be somewhere in London and the persons could also be Londoners. Because models are anonymous, not overly styled and have an appearance matching young Londoners makes them accessible, conveying sameness.

Photoshoot location – As stated in Chapter 3.3., the photographic location may be a focal paradigmatic choice with evident impact on the interpretation of an image or photograph. The industrial style of the location and the persons located in a tunnel signifies an underground association. The characters #, _, @ used in the advert text confirms this UG feature, referring the campaign has another branch in social media.

Characters #, _, @ – As stated, these particular characters refer to social marketing campaigns, inviting the spectator to find out more. Thus, these characters indicate that campaign has an extension in social media with the aim to generate attention, cause the campaign to go viral.

Outfits of the models – Both models are not overly styled as their outfits are neither radical nor delivering anything unexpected. This seems intentional by creating a platform for the classical Adidas brand symbols of the trefoil and three stripes to stand out. However, it is significant that the pieces the models are wearing are also timeless classics in terms of design and color.

“Classics” seem to be one theme delivered through the advert.

Originals & symbols of brand DNA – The advert bundles together symbols that originate from the Adidas brand DNA regarding the white trefoil logo at the bottom right corner combined with the features found in the clothing and the small capital-lettered text “ADIDAS ORIGINALS” confirms this notion. However, a new design is presented in the form of the sneaker alongside these classics. The sneaker’s outsole is well displayed in the image, showcasing the LEGO-like blocks by making this feature eye grabbing. These blocks on the sneaker’s outsole regard significant design features to NMD Sneaker. The image combines signs that signify heritage and history together with a bit of an unusual looking sneaker design. This juxtaposition creates the impression of trust towards future innovations by Adidas.

NMD sneaker – in terms of text, the NMD is an equally significant element in the ad as LONDON. To be able to define what the NMD is about, the spectator must already have some understanding of it. If the spectator is a sneaker head the message is more obvious and can be connected to the sneakers worn by the models. Simultaneously it can create a buzz for a possible sneaker launch event held in London. If the spectator is incapable of connecting the NMD to any particular element in the image, this ignorance in best-case may cause action to find out more.

As stated, different audiences bring different cultural competencies to their interpretation as the same signs are not necessarily employed in their “reading” (Bulmer et al., 2004). The signifier–signified relationships in the Adidas advert are

specific and the meanings may exist only to those who have a relation to the signs presented in the advert. However, to those who cannot create proper signifier–signified relationships their curiosity may increase the need to learn what the advert is about by causing action and interest. The advert leaves many open threads and therefore the advert can be viewed as a mere teaser rather than a traditional sneaker advert.

08.2 Analysis of New Balance 247

DENOTATIVE LEVEL

The New Balance advert depicts a male walking on a street or plaza on a daytime. The model is noncelebrity wearing casual street wear: a beige bomber jacket and white shirt underneath, dark denim jeans with leg bottoms rolled up and cognac brown leather sneakers. His head is covered with a brown felt hat resembling a fedora style. The outfit regards a selection of different brown tones. The male is not a teenager but instead appears to be an adult in his thirties. The male is looking to the side and the spectator has impression that the male does not know he is being photographed while crossing the square.

The format of image is medium and the male is the focus while the background is unsharp. The advert is almost a full-body image of the male, however the top of the hat is cropped out. Light is natural and the colors of the image are soft. The blurred background strengthens the soft impression, while the focused male figure channels attention to him.



Figure 24. Analysed advert: New Balance 247 Luxe campaign image

In terms of graphic elements most of the space is reserved for the numbers 247 which are surrounded by a rectangle frame that reveals the background of the image due to its opacity. This element occupies half of the entire space of the advert, underlining the essence of the numbers 247. At the top right corner the New Balance text with letters NB are placed together with the slogan "Always in Beta" which is also inside a square-shaped frame. The slogan represents the company ideology to strive for to continuous improvement. All letters, numbers and graphics are selected to be the same color of yellowish brown complimenting the other brown tones established in the image. Text in the New Balance advert, can be viewed as important fragments for the interpretation by guiding and extending the interpretation towards more holistic directions. According Barthes (1977), this quality of text is called relay function.

CONNOTATIVE LEVEL

Blog form - As stated in Sub-chapter 6.2.2., New Balance is firstly known as an athletic brand based around performance products, particularly shoes. The company has a long history in conventional athletic market. However, the sport market fragmentation and diversified perception of the sport industry has influenced stylistic approaches to sport advertising. The New Balance advert grasps current shifts happening in the industry where sport has become a part of fashion. According to van Leeuwen et al. (2001), connotations can arise through the style of the artwork. The photographic style of this advert resembles street-style photography commonly used on fashion blogs and sites that report fashion trends from streets and events. Thus, the photographic style imitates the "blog form"

of fashion photography capturing fashion and different styles in daily life spotted on the streets. The stylistic approach represents a step from the traditional athletic paradigm towards the street fashion genre. The photoshoot location and the impression of the photo as a snapshot and the effortless look of the male confirms the concept of "street fashion".

Outfit of the model - the set of signs taken together in the New Balance advert regard suggestion of contemporary fashion as the outfit mixes classical elements with more casual pieces of the fedora hat, bomber jacket, jeans and sneakers. The felt hat regards as an accessory seen on rappers. Pharrell Williams caused a fashion buzz once he adopted an odd shaped Vivienne Westwood felt hat as his "signature" mark while combining it with tracksuits or other pieces established in street fashion. Another rapper who even caused a sales peak, particularly in fedora hat sales, was Future. According to hat merchant Marc Williamson of Harlem's Flame Keepers Hat Club: "fedora hats were definitely considered an old guy's hat until Future started wearing them. Now (in early 2016) we get plenty of calls from guys wanting the 'Future hat'" (Platon, 2016). As stated in Chapter 3.3. advertisers tend to borrow the styles established by pop culture and sell the items with these styles that might appear as interesting combinations to the mass market (Goldman et al., 1996). The fedora hat that appears in this New Balance advert can be viewed as being influenced by the hat trend among rappers.

Elements of sartorialism - New Balance sneakers are known for their respected craftsmanship in the sneaker industry and the look and design of the cognac brown leather



Figure 25. Pharrell Williams' crazy hat at Grammy Awards 2014



Figure 26. Future and Fedora hat in Atlanta 2015



Figure 27. Kanye West in Alpha Industries MA-1 bomber

sneakers in the advert can be viewed as upgraded versions of the regular sneaker. In terms of model's outfit, the ensemble he wears, consists of pieces that are somewhat archetypal in fashion history. Headwear is commonly referenced as a cultural attribute (van Leeuwen et al. 2001). In the nineteenth century a hat signaled social class status. Currently, the fedora hat the model wears in the advert can be considered a sartorial symbol and related to the "modern dandy". However, a hatmaker as a profession, represents exquisite craftsmanship and tailoring skills. The dark denim jeans the model wears can be viewed as symbols of indigo traditions. Indigo dying and indigo jeans have a long and respected history in Japan where they are preserved, valued and kept as the finest outcome of the jean industry. Including this type of dark denim jeans, can be viewed as a statement targeting sartorialism and luxury associations. Thus, the advert presents "new luxury" in the context of street fashion, that is not commonly considered as a traditional setting for luxury items due the advert consists references to craft production and particularly to old production methods by making them "new luxury". The bomber or flight jacket instead originated from pilots and has triggered down to become an iconic part of fashion and pop culture. The flight jacket consists of functional and ergonomic tailoring for pilots in specific circumstances. The flight jacket has inspired designers and been adapted by rappers such as Travis Scott and Kanye West with the latter possibly making significant impact to flight jackets popularity due to repeatedly appearing with an Alpha Industry bomber and donning this popular style. These iconic, sartorial and pop cultural elements can be presumed to be assimilated into the New Balance brand and to the 247 sneaker the advert promotes.

Color scheme – The use of similar color in different signs connects different signs together effecting transfer of their signifieds (Williamson, 1978; Rose, 2016). In the New Balance advert the selection of different shades of browns creates cohesion by highlighting the color and the signs identified by the similarity in coloring. Shades of brown are repeated in the advert in different elements and the palette is sophisticated by creating interesting contrast what are considered to be "traditional" sport colors which usually regard high intensity and bright colors. The color selection presented in the image can also be considered as a statement towards fashion. The brown color can be kept also a natural color of leather that the sneakers in the image appear to be made of, while leather as material also relates to shoemaking and craftsmanship.

247 – refers to 24 hours a day, 7 days a week or "all the time". In the ad it refers to the New Balance sneaker style promoted in the advert. The style name captures the character the sneaker is designed to serve all-round footwear that combines comfort and performance. The fact the 247 occupies so considerable great space in the advert signifies its essence and what the advert stresses to the spectator and it can be considered a key message of the advert. It promotes both the sneaker style of sophisticated look with performance qualities and its design ideology behind. 247 has a somewhat equally important role in the image as the photograph itself.

08.3 Analysis of Puma x Fenty

DENOTATIVE LEVEL

The advert depicts two persons, a young black female and a black male of similar age.

The female in the picture is Barbadian singer, rapper and songwriter Rihanna Fenty. Rihanna as an artist represents a young, successful, confident female who has become part of the hip hop and r'n'b elite.

Despite Rihanna is dominating the image, the role of the male is equally important. The male of the ad is rapper and producer Travis Scott. However, he could be mixed to another American rapper Asap Rocky as they both do have a very similar look due the face is not properly showing. Both Scott and Rihanna represent pop culture scene that is mash-up of street style, high fashion, and hip hop and r'n'b music. In terms of body postures, expression and presence of the models, both appear as self-assertive and careless. Scott has no attention either to the camera or to Rihanna. Rihanna, in turn, is looking to the camera behind her fringe leaving her face partly hidden.

The photograph is taken in a studio. The format is medium. The background is blank and empty. Two cubes that function as seats, create shadows and some depth to the image. One of the cubes functions as a podium to the sneaker presented in the advert. The quality of the light is controlled, bold and artificial. Shadows are hard as well as the contrast between light and dark tones. Colors are desaturated and the color scheme of the picture is strict and narrow and the impression of the image in terms of colors is near to black and

white photo, however, the color scheme appears slightly richer.

In terms of graphic elements, text at the top right corner says "Fenty by Rihanna". The font used with "by Rihanna" is a gothic style. The jumping cat in front of it refers and is a symbol for Puma. The eye is making a couple of this jumping cat and the white wave symbol on a side of the sneaker both signifying Puma brand. Notable is that the brand name "Puma" is not in a written form. The text "Fenty" is placed on top occupying most of the space given to the text. The font style is bold – differing from the gothic style. The style, size, and positioning of word Fenty give the impression that it is punched on its place – like branding irons used to do. Text helps to define what is essential in the image.

CONNOTATIVE LEVEL

Rihanna – The use of celebrities in adverts represents a statement by the brand owners to set the brand or product in a certain light and connect it to a certain culture or the "world" the celebrity represents. The qualities of the celebrity, the signifieds, are assumed to be shifted from the human to the product and brand the advert promotes. (Dyer, 1982.) Rihanna has gained status as a fashion influencer, and her outfits and looks are reported, followed and copied. When Puma in 2014 announced she would become a creative director, she gave the brand fashion credibility and edginess through her status as an artist and fashion icon. Due to Rihanna's collaborations, the Puma brand was placed in a new light due to the personality and image of Rihanna. Another fresh approach from Puma has been to focus on females as a segment. The sneaker scene is traditionally male



Figure 28. Analysed advert: Puma x Fenty Creeper campaign image

driven regarding its offering and advertising, and therefore building a strategy and communication based on females has differentiated Puma from its competitors. This approach was strengthened once Rihanna came on board.

The Couple – Selecting Scott and Rihanna to the campaign reinforces the aimed message of youth, success, and edginess as they are as persons representing the same effect. Both persons are widely followed not only due to their music status but also their look, which brands they are wearing and how and which fashion shows' front row they are attending. Selecting Rihanna and Scott to the ad also hits the sweet spot to mix sport labeled hip hop culture and fashion. This underlines the democratization of fashion and the current consumer culture in which these two genres are collaborating.

It was rumored the couple dating, and this advertising campaign functioned as good fuel for these rumors and encourages the spectator to think there would exist a greater involvement between them. Based on their body expression both seem to be comfortable with their presence. In terms of body postures, expression and presence the advert can be viewed as imperfect and a result of the undirected spontaneous moment by creating the impression of real or record of an authentic moment. The imperfectness accelerates interest towards the image.

Dark sports aesthetic – There appear several references that can be labeled as goth style: the typography selection, the hard contrasts regarding the light tones and hard shadows, and styling of Scott and Rihanna. Rihanna's dark lips, black dress and Scott's trained and naked upper

body revealing the tattoos combined to black leather pants, can be viewed signifying dark sport aesthetic. In terms of the creeper shoe, it has a long-rooted history among different subcultures and therefore the type of shoe the adverts represent conveys second-order meanings derived from its history. Creeper was originally worn by British soldiers in World War Two that became later iconic footwear of teddy boys, British punks and rockabilies (Tukshoes.com, 2017). Thus, the product design is borrowed from fashion and music-based subcultures. Therefore, it can be stated this advert utilizes the concept of bricolage presented in Sub-chapter 4.3. where the product is placed into new stylized ensembles. The advert represents dark-toned sports aesthetic and aims to hail fashion enthusiasts. The advert style is finalized in post-production by manipulating the colors and making the overall appearance dramatic.



Figure 29. 1950s Creepers: lace up and monk strap styles



Figure 30. Tebby Boys wearing creepers

09. Findings & discussion

This chapter discusses of the key findings on the semiotic analysis which conducted on three sneaker adverts. This discussion is referenced to research question presented in Chapter 1.2. First sub-Chapter outlines the key ideologies and concepts discovered in the adverts. As stated in the Chapter 7., the connotations arise when the signifier – signified relationships can be observed through the culture in which they are embedded to. This forms a key principle exposing the meaning-making process. Stylistic choices are discussed in Sub-chapter 9.2., which addresses the visualities delivered by the adverts among their look and feel. Final Sub-Chapter 9.3.

introduces the elements that deliver differences by comparing the adverts to each other's.

09.1 Signification of key concepts

This chapter gathers the key concepts delivered through the three adverts and aims to reveal the implicit coding devices behind these abstractions. The concepts presented in the following, are related to the visual elements chosen for the images and the cultural context the adverts are derived from and attached to. The purpose of this chapter is to showcase these visual cues tied to wider cultural contexts that create these abstractions. The discovered key concepts: authenticity, creativity, and the sport industry are introduced in the following.

Q1 What are the key connotations delivered through selected adverts?

09.1.1 Authenticity

Authenticity appears to be a focal element that each of the selected adverts tends to mediate and regards what is considered to be “fake” and what is “real”. According to Fischer (2017), in order to appear authentic brand need to be connected to culture that is meaningful to target audience. Thus, culture can be regarded as a reflection of authenticity. Exposing and employing the cultural coding system requires the spectator to wear the cultural lenses while looking these adverts. Thus, the decoding process regards understanding cultural signs and symbols that are turned into visual forms in the advert (Moisander et al., 2006). Signifier-signified relations are relevant when references to subculture and lifestyle are established in the image (Goldman et al., 1996). Each advert in the analysis relies on different methods and coding devices signifying authenticity whether conveyed

in particular individuals, places or styles the adverts represents.

Adidas’ interpretation of authenticity

The Adidas advert relies on brand fundamentals; on the three stripes and trefoil symbols weaved into the Adidas DNA. In addition, the chosen Adidas garments on the models, represent classics and signify Adidas Originals, the core of the brand. The advert is also not over styled as the models are mundane and could represent the look of young Londoners. These features create an unpretentious impression for the advert which indicates that Adidas relies on the elements from which the brand originates. These image composition choices tend to create the feel of Adidas being honest, effortless and true to itself.

New Balance’s interpretation of authenticity

Authenticity in the New Balance advert is related to both pop cultural references regarding rap scene and to craft production or more precisely old production methods. The advert captures significations that are brought from context to another. According to Coldman et al. (2001, p. 15–16), chains of signification are constructed when meanings are modified by lifting meanings from one context to another and placing them into the advertising framework. In advertising, this density of meaning modification causes an unusually high level of second-order signifiers (Goldman et al., 2001, p. 17). Exposing the cultural exchange and sign traffic from one context to the advert, requires a trained eye. The fedora hat, indigo jeans, leather sneaker and flight jacket regard an ensemble of signs that can be interpreted as signifieds of icons of old production traditions and skilled knowledge.

Puma's interpretation of authenticity

In terms of sign value, discussed in Sub-chapter 6.2., according Goldman et.al (2001) celebrities have considerably high potential and effective sign value. In the case of Puma, it can be assumed that bringing Rihanna and Travis Scott on board causes an immediate injection for the brand's credibility. Rihanna provides not only her name and image value for the Puma brand and Creeper sneaker, but also her input for design outcomes as she was announced to be the creative director for Puma. As stated in the analysis in Sub-chapter 8.3., selecting Rihanna and Scott for the ad achieves mixing sport-labelled hip-hop culture with high fashion as they both are influencers of this intersection. The buzz generated by them dating creates an extra layer of "realness". The creatives and marketers behind the Puma advert chose these influencers which they believe have an authentic relationship that is meaningful to target audience. These influencers represent particular music, fashion and lifestyle and therefore both Scott and Rihanna with their status signify persons that bear credibility. Puma wants to be connected and labelled with this particular culture as a brand. Thus, the advert aims to adopt the lifestyle represented both Rihanna and Scott, not just their face value and fame.

09.1.2 Creativity

As stated in Sub-chapter 3.3., advertising is a practice based on creating a new perspective to something known. When consumers read advertising, they look at symbolic resources, new ideas and improved concrete versions of old ideas (McCracken, 1987). Creativity can be viewed as an outcome of structured improvisation and novel

ways of mixing and mending things. Advertising uses culture as an inspiration for such novel approaches. Each of the advert tend to provide something that could be considered unexpected whether through the manner of showing a new idea or something original.

Adidas' interpretation of creativity

As stated in the advert analysis, the Adidas ad leaves open threads for the spectator to fuel the curiosity. The advert has interconnections to viral branding. According to Holt (2004), viral branding assumes consumers perform the work discovering the brand with online platforms providing a means to accelerate this discovery. The location, London, has a significant role combined with particular characters #, _, @, referring to social marketing campaign possibly occurring in London, which invites the spectator to find out more. These elements may generate buzz and add "talk value" that something might be happening somewhere in London.

In addition to a fresh approach to not appear self-explanatory, the advert presents a new kind of sneaker design that at first glimpse appears odd regarding the outsole of the sneaker. The design looks original, distinctive and due to its unique look, the advert conveys a message that a new kind of innovation is about to be revealed.

Creativity is anchored in the marketing approach and original-looking innovation presented in the Adidas ad.

New Balance's interpretation of creativity

The New Balance advert is a presentation of street fashion. It intends to provide a fresh sign

combination in the chosen stylistic form. New Balance relies on the character's appearance that could be defined as a "modern street dandy". The advert represents a whole ensemble of fashionable signs in the form of a sartorialist style regarding how the New Balance 247 sneaker could be worn. The "Future hat" references to the current remix of rap music and fashion indicating "it accessory" and the message is sent for in the know. With this fashionable presentation, New Balance adopts the unconventional approach of what is considered as "sport style". This extension in New Balance's appearance can be viewed as showcasing the brand in a fresh light and as an aspiration to be on top of what is going on.

Puma's interpretation of creativity

Puma leans on the presence of Rihanna and Travis Scott with the latter representing natural sidekick due to their rumored relationship. The advert is injected by not only with Rihanna's fame, but also with her spirit. Puma's announcement that Rihanna will be the creative director of the brand increases her symbolic power. Rihanna signifies artistry through her musical accomplishments and autonomy as a music creator. Her engagement to the brand due to her role is naturally expected to contribute to Puma's visual appearance and designs by creating new interest in the brand.

09.1.3 Artistic Sport Industry

The fusion of sport and fashion has enabled sport-rooted companies to expand their creative environment allowing more expressive elements to communicate the brand. As discussed in Chapter 6.1., this fusion has extended the perception of the sport industry and what could be done within it. As quoted by Dirk Schönberger in Chapter

6.1., the fusion is not fully financial, but rather concerns how people are starting to look at the brands within the industry and it makes people look again (Mellery-Pratt, 2015). Rappers and sneakers' entrance into high fashion exemplifies sign traffic from one context to another, the signifier traveling towards new signified, resulting in fresh approaches to the industry. However, once fresh meaning becomes appropriated as popular signs, some of its interest is in danger of disappearing by becoming more of a norm or cliché and losing part of the aroused interest. As Chapter 6.1. describes, the sport industry has undergone a transformation together with fashion, hip hop and street styles by mixing these traditions and perceptions and by bringing these arenas closer to each other.

Summarizing all three analyses, similarities can be defined regarding the way the adverts outline the industry. Advertising has shifted from more concrete towards abstraction. Instead of directly showcasing the product features, all three adverts tend to lean on immaterial qualities that are associated through certain styles, authenticity and creativity causing a higher amount of second-order signifiers and a meaning transfer process that is more complex to define. Performance and innovation exist in the adverts, however these meanings are exchanged on the side of pop culture, aesthetic style and other more abstract attachments.

09.2 Signification of style

Q2 What are the style choices made in image production? Can these particular styles and aesthetic choices be loosely defined?

This chapter aims to demonstrate what kind of aesthetics are attached to the adverts. As stated in Sub-chapter 2.3., the aestheticization of style provides brand one way to be noticed, and in the longer term the stylistic consistency can be turned into a competitive advantage and powerful identification method written in the brand's strategy. One of the brand's primary tasks regards identity management through aesthetics and to be connected to certain style (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997, p. 85). Style is related to a brand's relevance and according to Goldman et al. (1991, p. 10–11), appropriating certain style to an image can be significant regarding a brand's market value. Based on the analysis, a common insight that unites the three adverts is that the style conceals the product's features while the style in the advert simultaneously reflects the key features of the product. The case of Adidas regards the innovation, New Balance combines performance with street fashion and Puma concerns fashionable street sneakers where the product features are embedded in the stylistic fashion formulas.

Adidas

The advert aesthetic is down to earth and the photoshoot itself does not give the impression of big budget campaign which creates the feel of accessibility. As the advert can be assumed to function as a teaser, it makes sense that the money in the budget to be reserved for the launch event. Rather than the style the advert

represents, the open threads the advert is not closing, are more meaningful. The adverts ability to deliver brand DNA together with the new idea are equally essential to the open threads. The Adidas original symbols juxtaposed with the new innovation are crucial for meaning transfer, however in terms of stylistic expression the advert delivers no surprises.

New Balance

The advert connotes modern fashion centric everyday life on the street and attempts to deliver it in an effortless manner. The New Balance advert's stylistic approach is related to aspirations to appear relevant and stay on "pulse". According to Goldman et. al (1996, p. 11), the adverts ability to hail the target audience, depends on how powerful appropriation of a cultural moment or style is represented in the image. Regarding style, New Balance grasps photography's "blog form" or "street style photography". The style of the New Balance advert can be considered inspired by fashion blogs and Instagram accounts that focus on capturing and representing daily fashion. This is discussed already in Sub-chapter 8.2. in the advert's analysis. Since street-photography can be considered as one of the formats of fashion documentary, a common specific character of street-style photos regards the "walking mode" of the model. This feature underlines that the photographer was able to capture an unstaged fashion moment in a snapshot. The New Balance advert can be viewed as an imitation of such photographic form. This also tends to create an objective perspective of the sneaker's representation that is established on the street by the user who happens to be quite "fashionable".

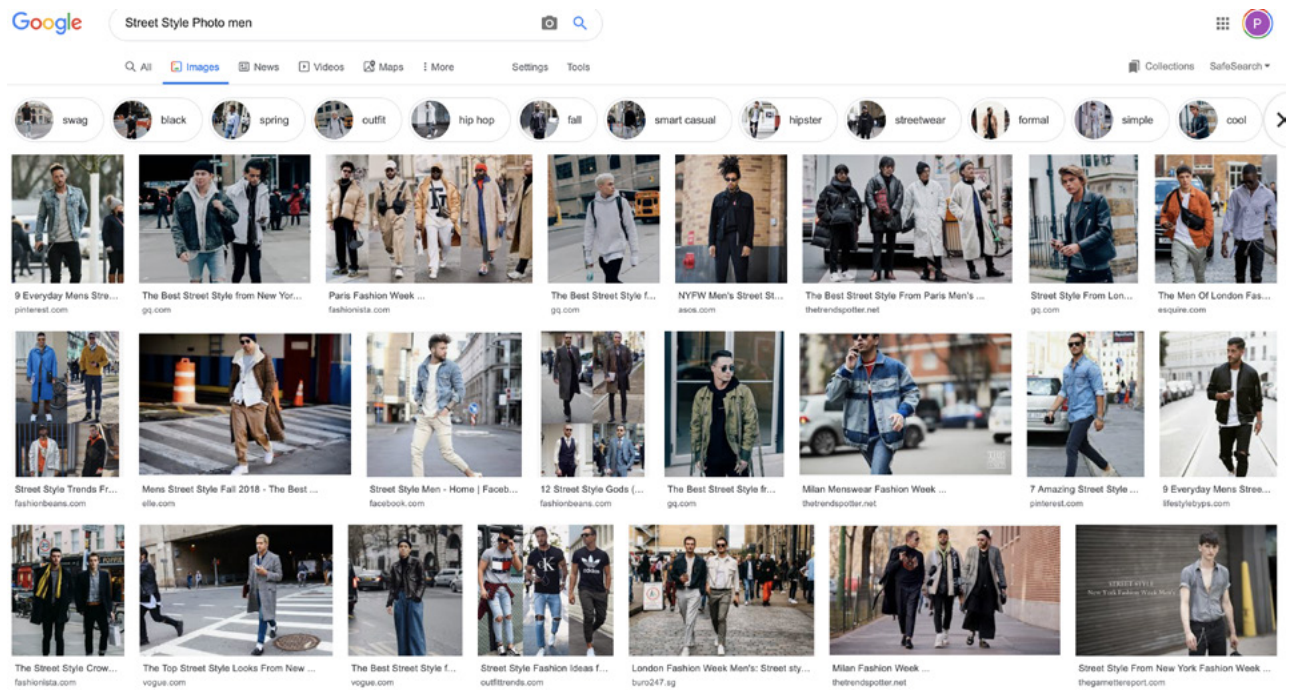


Figure 31. Google search results for “street style photo men”

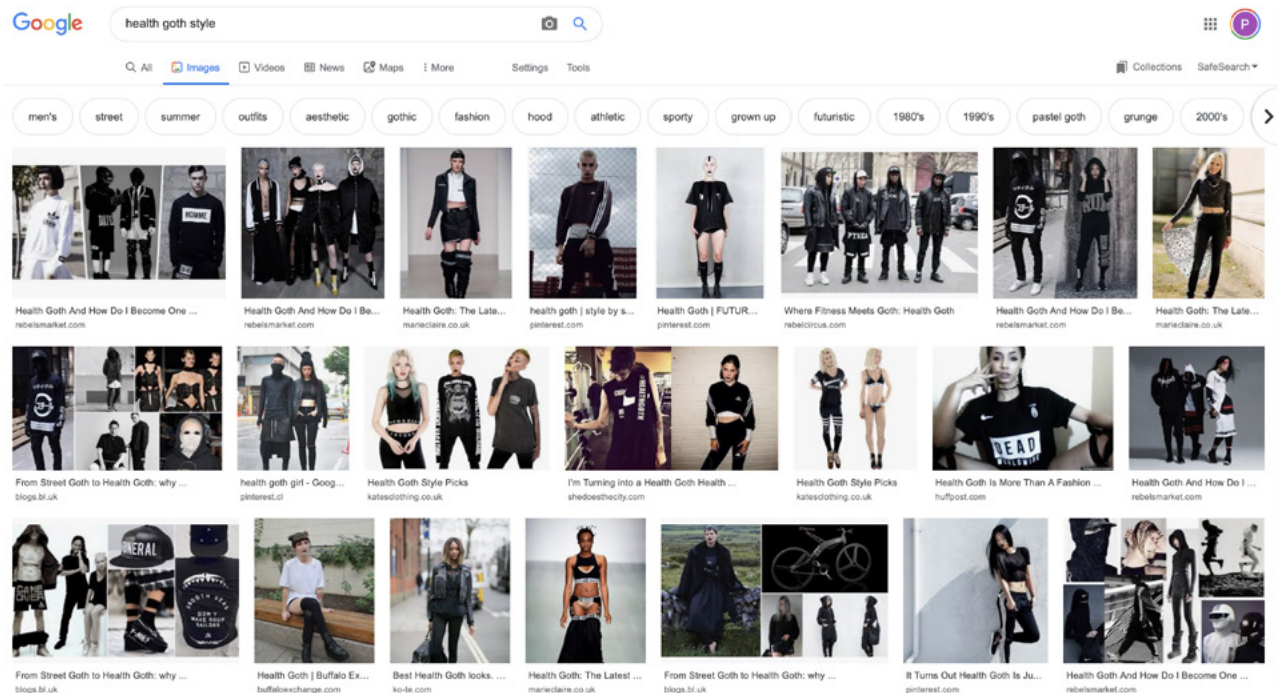


Figure 32. Google search results for “health goth style”

The graphic design of the New Balance advert forms another significant statement for the style used in the advert. The idea of using large box and the sneaker style number 247 inside this frame is bold and unique. The large frame is eye grabbing, distinctive and efficient and through consistent long-term use it might become a signature style that directly functions as a reference for New Balance brand.

Puma

The advert mends different styles and elements regarding the dark color tones, harsh shadows, gothic style font, no clear depth of field, the appearance of the two characters and what they bring from their world to the Puma advert. The overall style enables creating dark and dramatic sport aesthetic. A significant part of the style creation is not just solely achieved with the camera but also via photo manipulation and graphic design. The advert leans on the two characters represented, on their stylistic appearance and on the style created in post processing.

The aesthetic impression is dark and references to goth can be discovered regarding the font choices, the darkness achieved through lightning, the makeup and outfits combined with the overall color scheme. The advert manages to convey a unique signifying style and sport aesthetic that can be described due its darkness as "health goth" or "sport goth". At the time, Puma advert launched, the trend "health goth" was arising and Puma advert can be viewed as an accelerator for this trend. Thus, the syntagmatic choices made in the advert cause a rearrangement of signifiers and signified due the advert blends opposite styles together – sport and goth.

09.3 Signification of difference

Q3 What differentiates products from each other in selected adverts? What are the elements of difference?

As stated in Sub-chapter 7.1., the athletic shoe industry can be considered as a suitable example of a parity industry where actual product feature differences are minimal and where difference is created in the image creation process (Goldman et al., 1996). Based on the findings of the analysis, the selected adverts seem to not be so concerned with communicating these product features as a first priority. In terms of design, each sneaker had a distinctive appearance with Puma presenting a platform sneaker, Adidas the lego-block outsole design and New Balance showing a sneaker references to brogue shoe. However, none of the adverts were showcasing specific product qualities. As discussed in Sub-chapter 9.2., style and expressive elements arises as key elements of distinction, meaning the aesthetic power seems to provide the key element of difference rather than the product features. However, product features are attached to more abstract elements and such elements discovered in this thesis include authenticity, creativity and the aesthetization of style. Each advert has its own interpretation of these elements.

Some correlation exists between the sport industry makeover and signification of style. The aestheticization of style is accelerated due to the sport industry fusion allowing more expressive elements for sport companies to communicate their brand by making the style an essential distinction method. This "trend" is also discovered in this analysis. However, as Fischer (2017) has

stated, visually appealing is not enough since the content needs to be engaging. Goldman et al. (1996) call this advertising quality as “hailing”. According to them it is important how powerful appropriation of a cultural moment or style is represented in the image (Goldman et al. , 1996, p. 11).

In the following section, the abstract formulas of each advert are showcased in order to expose the differences. These formulas are based on the previous discussion and results discovered in the analysis.

Adidas

Formula: Original DNA + Innovation + Buzz

The Adidas advert targets both female and male audience. As stated in the discussion, Adidas leans on its originality located in its DNA, which is signified through the iconic brand symbols of the three stripes and trefoil, which the eye tends to collect from the advert. Innovation regarding the odd and original-looking sneaker is juxtaposed in the ad using signs that connote the heritage of Adidas. This juxtaposition creates a scenario for future DNA. The open threads in the ad combined together with characters signifying online marketing campaigns cause increased curiosity and potential buzz, which is caused by the event about to occur somewhere in London, bringing the attention to the innovation and to the NMD sneaker.

New Balance

Formula: Craftsmanship + high street fashion + performance

The New Balance targets a male audience. The advert provides suggestion of a brand that is modern by grasping the popularity of street fashion. The advert creates the impression of high street fashion in an effortless manner where a fashionable-looking male happens to walk on a street wearing New Balance sneakers. Despite this unpretentious suggestion the advert conveys, the represented moment that seems somewhat unstaged is however a result of premeditated image design and imitation of a particular unstaged moment. Additionally, this moment is carefully designed to position the brand in high street fashion segment using the sartorialist impression it creates. The elements chosen for the image signify sartorialism as well as craftsmanship, which underline the upgraded street fashion represented in the image. New Balance aims to extend its perception from performance sneaker manufacturer to a more fashionable brand with the ability to adjust performance trainers to become a more exquisite sneaker. Thus, the 247 sneaker is here placed into a context where the sneaker is wished to be viewed as representing a new form of luxury.

Puma

Formula: Celebrity / artist + fashion + hijacked culture of the celebrity

The Puma advert targets to a female audience. The sneaker industry has traditionally been male or at least unisex focused. The brand enables to stand out due to the strategic choice to invest in a female audience. Segmentation can be viewed as method for differentiation. The advert not only promote the Fenty Creeper sneaker, but also Rihanna’s role as creative director of the company. The advert aspires to turn the heads

of audience towards a new Puma with the help received from Rihanna. Rihanna donates her name and designer input to Puma bringing credibility and artistic extension to the brand's perception. The trade exchange is also cultural as the Puma brand hijacks these qualities attached to both Rihanna and Travis Scott. With this joint Puma aims to turn perception towards a credible fashion-forward brand.

10. Conclusions & implications

The purpose of this study was to use semiotic interpretation to better understand how brands and products can be encoded into advertisements. This was achieved through decoding sneaker adverts and a sneaker culture review. This thesis represented an attempt to outline the environment where image creation takes place, how meaning transfer processes should be acknowledged and managed. This study also aims to encourage brand owners to import this visual expertise and aesthetic sensitivity to their strategic toolbox and increase the self-awareness regarding brand appearance and expressions. The principles of semiotics

can be viewed as an effective strategic tool for brand owners and image creators to avoid gaps between brand intention and consumer interpretation. Semiology as a practice clarifies the meaning transfer structures regarding what images mean and how they mean. This thesis provides a request for brand owners to place branding aesthetics at the core and raise the visual matters to the same level with product design and innovation, service design or whichever the core skills are in question. This regards a trained practice that relies on showing instead of telling. The increased awareness of

visual matters can be converted into aesthetic power and a competitive advantage.

Based on this analysis, McCracken's (1987) notion mentioned in Sub-chapter 3.2., that advertisements are fundamentally based on meaning transfer by bringing the brand and the representation of culturally constituted world together, is confirmed. This analysis and the sneaker culture overview showcased that more abstract attachments are exchanged on the side of the product, which confirms the notion that advertisements shift from more concrete towards world of abstraction. Adverts aesthetic power is established when the product becomes not just something physical. The asset of aesthetic power exists for companies with the ability to reflect, interpret and express the culture which is valuable to the target audience. To be able to connect to the audience, brand owners need to obtain shared consciousness of lifestyle, values and signs that are meaningful to the target audience. However, the obtained knowledge is not sufficient since the ability to transform such abstractions and immaterial qualities into visual forms is also required. Cultural relations and lifestyle orientations were discovered in the advert analysis and all the three adverts represented their visualization of these abstractions. In terms of relevance, aestheticization of style provides one stream for brand to appear agile and stay on pulse.

Brands and companies seek representational niches and consumer resonating spaces for individuation. Based on the sneaker culture study, advert analysis and literature view, it can be stated that one of the most important image construction instruments is culture. To turn culture into competence requires knowledge of cultural

conventions and signification, which then can be turned into manageable visual effort which has a strategic and goal orientated character. Therefore, image production requires both structural and cultural forms and the knowledge within. Thus, the purpose of the adverts is not only to create difference between competitors, but function as moderators of culture and values. This is confirmed in the analysis.

Based on the advert analysis, it appeared that creativity and authenticity were the key connotations delivered through the adverts. According Sub-chapter 3.1., authenticity can be translated into quality of being original, genuine and unique. Creativity instead according to McCracken (1987), appears as consumers lust to discover symbolic resources, new ideas and improved versions of old ideas. As stated, the asset of aesthetic power exists for companies with the ability transform such abstractions and immaterial qualities into visual forms. Each advert represented their visualization of authenticity and creativity. Their translations regarded loyalty to DNA, cultural relations and innovation in terms of product or the manner the product was presented. This thesis encourages brand owners to embrace original and creative approaches to create engagement with consumers and find a sincere manner to translate these abstractions to fit the brand DNA.

Image production and art directing particularly concern expertise to produce images with something to say to target audience. As discussed, according to Goldman et al. (1996), adverts ability "to hail" the spectator regards powerful appropriation of a cultural moment or style represented in the image (Goldman et al., 1996, p. 11). Image production should be

viewed as an interface for deeper value-based communication with target audiences and as an asset to create meaningful connections. The notion that brands' significance requires cultural relevance and to be part of some cultural setting, was confirmed in this thesis. Their significance regards what they can give to consumers for their personal journey. Thus, image production is important not merely for the sake of brand performance, but for the sake of ideologies and expressions engaging with consumers. As stated, all images are encoded with meanings in their creation and production and the knowledge from this process should be converted to more successful brand management through visual design.

Limitations of this study are acknowledged. The results are not generalizable, however a wider understanding of how brands and products can be encoded into advertisements was achieved. The purpose of the study was to gain expertise for future creative work and extend personal learnings. The methodological choices regard both purposes of the study by increasing the knowledge towards the studied phenomenon and by making sense of the encoding process. Semiotic strategies are viewed as beneficial assets for creative work which nevertheless is partly driven by intuition. The interpretations and analysis of this study should be considered as a method of revealing and addressing the meaning-transfer processes in the advertising and visual structuring. Image producers work is not solely to produce images. It can be argued that crucial part of this creative work is to look other images and observe the culture they are connected with. The eye and image construction skill can be trained with the strategies established in semiotics. This kind of knowledge may provide

better argumentation and communication skills in the business-driven environment that requires trust in visions and visual scenarios represented by creatives and increase the visual quality of image production towards more accurate brand management.

It is acknowledged that this thesis does not provide the only truth and it should be accepted there may exist multiplicity of interpretation regarding the advert analysis. In turn, thesis was concerned demonstrating the meaning transfer process structures in image production and gaining learnings how images get their meaning according the codes and signs relevant in the cultural context in which the images are read and produced and increase the awareness of these effects. Thus, the focus was to demonstrate the meaning transfer process. It is acknowledged the advert selection process lacks transparency and explicitness showcasing the process of arriving at these three adverts in the case study.

As this study was based on semiotic analysis and the approach was narrow, it can be suggested to continue to study the aesthetic power of images through a reader-response study, which could achieve more generalizable results. However, this thesis was not concerned with discovering advertisement patterns, but rather the focus was to gain a better understanding of the complex and implicit meaning-making process. The studies between the brand intention and consumer interpretation can be viewed as interesting fields for further study. However, this would require brand owners to reveal their strategies and intentions behind their communication to conduct this comparison. It could be beneficial to outline the elements of successful brand communication where gaps between intention and interpretation

do not exist. The balance between explicit and implicit cues of advertising and the tension between familiarity and surprise could also be explored.

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